

Sabbatical Report 2014

'Leadership: an Evolving Vision'



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Executive Summary

This report examines key ideas for effective leadership with a particular emphasis on leading change. It draws on current research from leading educationalists at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. Five sub-themes related to leading change are identified and expanded on which are ultimately intended to lead to a positive impact on student achievement. The five sub-themes are:

- Challenging the underlying beliefs and assumptions of our leadership, how we teach, and how we learn
- Future focused learning - personalised, ubiquitous learning
- The importance of effective leadership of school culture
- Leading assessment and improved performance
- Leading change - strategy

Through reflection and group discussions during and after the intensive week long course personal outcomes related to my individual context have been developed. These outcomes are intended to challenge how I lead in order to effect change.

Leadership is an evolving vision with constant challenges that often involve some form of change. School culture has a huge effect on change and it is the principal who has the most impact on this.

Purpose

The purpose of my sabbatical was to attend a seven day intensive study course at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (Harvard University, Boston, USA) in order to strengthen my leadership and management skills, revitalize my personal vision of leadership, and learn new methods for improving individual, group, and organizational performance.

The course was aimed at experienced school principals responsible for thinking strategically about their schools.

Background and Rationale

I have been a principal in small rural schools for the past eight years. During that time I have undertaken a wide range of study and professional development which I feel has impacted positively on my professional performance. I have completed my Masters in Education and have participated in MOE contracts with my staff almost every year. I believe strongly in the value of professional development and felt that I needed to find a new challenge to continue to improve my leadership skills.

For the past 18 months I have been a member of a very proactive Professional Learning Group consisting of seven other principals from a variety of schools in Marlborough. Through one of our members we learnt of a very highly regarded programme run annually at Harvard University.

The objectives of the course were focussed on school leadership which was just what I was looking for. The course aimed to provide experienced school leaders with an opportunity to reflect and focus on developing and strengthening the leadership skills needed to address key challenges and raise student achievement.

We decided to think big and apply to attend as a group in order to get the benefits of synthesising our ideas and supporting each other in our goals once we returned to New Zealand. I discussed the idea with my Board of Trustees and my appraiser, both of whom were extremely encouraging and supportive of me using this opportunity for my sabbatical.

So began a year involving applications, fundraising, PLG discussions, BOT presentations, prior tasks, and pre-readings. The professional discussions held in our PLG group prior to our departure were very thought provoking as we started to examine our leadership styles.

I thrive on challenges and like to be at the cutting edge of education so was excited to finally depart in early July to take up the amazing opportunity I had been given to learn from highly regarded experts in their educational field, and alongside experienced leaders from around the world.

Methodology

My sabbatical involved attending a seven day intensive course at the Harvard Graduate School of Education 2014 Summer Institute called 'Leadership: an Evolving Vision (LEV)'. The Graduate School Of Education Principals' Centre

hosted 197 principals, directors, district officials and other educational leaders from around the world including the US, Canada, Australia, NZ , UAE, Austria, Myanmar, Singapore, China and Grenada. I stayed with the eight other principals from Marlborough in Boston which was very convenient as we could walk to the campus.

The participants on the course worked with Harvard faculty and experts on school leadership and reform to examine effective strategies for leading successful schools. The seven day 'Leadership: an Evolving Vision' Programme covered a range of topics relating to successful leadership, and the order in which these were scheduled throughout the week was intentionally designed to build on the learning and reflections of the previous sessions.

The course provided tools and strategies that enabled leaders to adapt and respond more effectively to dynamic school environments. It connected theory to practice to improve individual, group and organizational performance. Through plenary sessions, group discussions (with course attendees and then again with our PLG group), and personal reflection I assessed the effectiveness of my leadership style and strengthened my ability to meet current and future challenges.

Prior to the start of the programme we were asked to submit issues we faced in our leadership roles and from those responses the following diagram was developed to show the spread of issues.



The programme finished with the same diagram and challenged us to use the skills we had learned to look at our practices and initiate change to help deal with some of the issues. It also provided us with some practical frameworks and tools to trial.

The week long programme was structured into one, two or three in-depth sessions per day followed by small group discussions in our 'home' groups. The second day was a Project Adventure Day where we challenged ourselves in the outdoors and focused on team building skills. Each activity or session linked in with the theme of change and challenged us to change our perceptions and assumptions.

Our PLG group had been split so that we were each in a different home group. Consequently we met daily for discussions to clarify our thinking and how we could apply what we had learned to our New Zealand context.

Findings

The main theme that was threaded throughout the week was 'leading change' and topics were structured to cover personal change through to organisational change.

Within the overarching theme, sub-themes emerged which were very relevant to the ongoing challenges I face as a school leader. The five sub-themes I identified most with were:

1. Challenging the underlying beliefs and assumptions of our leadership, how we teach, and how we learn
2. Future focused learning - personalised, ubiquitous learning
3. The importance of effective leadership of school culture
4. Leading assessment and improved performance
5. Leading change - strategy

The following is a summary and discussion of the sub-themes I identified.

1. Challenging the underlying beliefs and assumptions that influence our leadership, how we teach, and how we learn

The first session began with a focus on our personal learning. We were asked to select a current challenge for us in our schools and to work through a framework that, in basic terms, helped us to identify a goal, analyse what assumptions, beliefs and thinking was preventing us from achieving the goal, and finally develop a plan. This was an extremely powerful process during which we partnered up with another principal to share our thinking.

Day two, the 'Project Adventure' day, continued to focus on overcoming challenges and the thinking we allow to hold us back as leaders. However, there was a practical side to the day as we engaged in team building activities, rock climbing, and high ropes activities within small groups. This gave a physical metaphor to the challenges and to our assumptions and beliefs. The instructors asked us to overcome our fears through changing our perceptions eg 'I'm not afraid of heights', 'I can do it', etc. The power of group dynamics and team encouragement was also highlighted.

The activity showed that ultimately 'fear' in some shape or form is what causes us to hold on to beliefs and behaviours, even when we know they are not working or meeting the challenge. For my challenge I had to rock climb up a high wall which is one of my worst fears but the power of focusing on going up rather than looking down (i.e changing my perception) and believing I could do it despite some preconceived ideas I had (changing my assumptions), helped me immensely. The rest of my group was hugely encouraging and the instructors asked us to set our goal first so that it was initially achievable i.e part way up the wall. The feeling of success was a very powerful one and made me realise what our students go through as learners. It made me realise that when we let go, or are courageous enough to move out of our comfort zones, we could accomplish so much more.

Challenging our beliefs and assumptions was also mentioned in the next session on personalised, ubiquitous (anytime, anywhere) learning as we need to change the way we think about teaching, learning and schooling.

2. Future focused learning - personalised, ubiquitous learning

The personalised, ubiquitous learning session and those related to it, reinforced for me that New Zealand is well ahead of America in terms of integrating technology into learning and changing the way we think of schooling. It was pleasing to hear some of

the world's leading educationalist's reaffirm that we are on the right pathway in terms of digital classrooms that have meaningful contexts, personalised learning (e.g. goal setting, feedback, individual pathways, formative assessment, Inquiry Learning), student-led conferences, etc. The sessions highlighted how technology can remove barriers to learning and make education inclusive and accessible to all.

We were also shown a great augmented reality programme which demonstrated how real-world environments and digital technologies can be used to create a unique learning experience for student scientists.

The changing way students learn impacts greatly on what schooling looks like and how we teach. The theme of change was evident as they challenged us to look at changes in content, pedagogy, assessment, and learning both inside and outside of the school. They stressed the importance of knowing your goals before mentioning technology, and providing multi-dimensional learning (i.e. classrooms and community - face-to-face and virtual).

Another area of interest was research into the brain. It showed how developmental factors have a bearing on learning. It highlighted the fact that students are with us for only part of the day and environmental factors impact greatly on student learning, which links in with the importance of home/school relationships. The influence that learning a second language has on the brain was also interesting as there are some studies that show that bilingualism has positive effects for the brain in later life, and that the sooner people start to learn a second language the better. This is an area for future research and one which may change the educational landscape as we know it.

3. The importance of effective leadership of school culture

The session on school culture emphasised how crucial this is to successful growth and change. It reinforced how important the principal is to establishing, maintaining, and developing culture, as although everybody is influencing culture in the school it is the principal and leadership team who have the greatest impact. This session challenged me to look at how I establish and maintain our school culture, and we were given a framework to follow in order to do this. It reinforced the importance of our vision driving our school culture, and showed that this is a strength of our NZ schooling system.

During this time we examined the 'power of influence'. These were the hidden cultures that can undermine a school culture. We also examined outliers and how to include these people into the school culture. This reinforced how important the appointment process is when selecting new influences on the team culture.

4. Leading assessment and improving performance

Another theme of the week was leading assessment and improving performance which involved the measurement and analysis of student progress. The focus on measurement and outcomes was a little more extreme than NZ as this is what drives education and, in some instances, salaries in the US. This is terribly detrimental as

we heard stories of the local educators 'teaching to the test' mentality, the lack of collaboration between teachers, schools and districts, and a very narrow curriculum.

The session did however reinforce what we are already doing in terms of personal goal setting with our students and formative assessment. They stressed the importance of individual feedback, students learning at their own pace, meaningful contexts, and scaffolding learning. Measures were used to gain data to identify student goals, and then teachers provided strategies to achieve the goals, monitored progress, and provided interventions. This is what we generally try to do in New Zealand, but the message was clear that data provides an insight into progress and next steps. It was used to provide some accountability to show that money and resources were making a difference. However some things were difficult to measure and the results could not be determined in the short term. This directly related to our key competencies.

The sessions often related to previous sessions and we were shown how there are digital curriculum software programmes that can analyse what students are doing and give personalised pathways based on their results. This is similar to programmes we use such as e-asTTle and mathletics.

In order to improve student performance we were shown a changing metaphor for learning organisations that showed the teacher as a facilitator, and assessment as authentic and portfolio based. This links into our Inquiry Learning programme, collaboration with others (teacher/student/parent,etc), and the sharing of learning in google drive and cloud based programmes (eg blog, twitter).

Consultation was also explored in order to improve performance. We were shown how the questions we ask determine the value of the consultation. 'How' questions are the usual form of consultation, but in order to get broader more open responses we went through a range of theories including asking 'Why' questions and when to use these.

5. Leading change - strategy

The overarching theme of leading change was woven throughout the week and a quote that had an enormous impact on me was "You will never change what you are willing to tolerate." Change and continuous improvement are the hallmarks of a progressive school and something we value highly. Through self-review we can identify the change we need, but in order to lead change we need to have a strategy, which is basically a plan of action to get from where we are now to where we want to go. We were given the following definition of what good strategy is, which we need to bear in mind when implementing change.

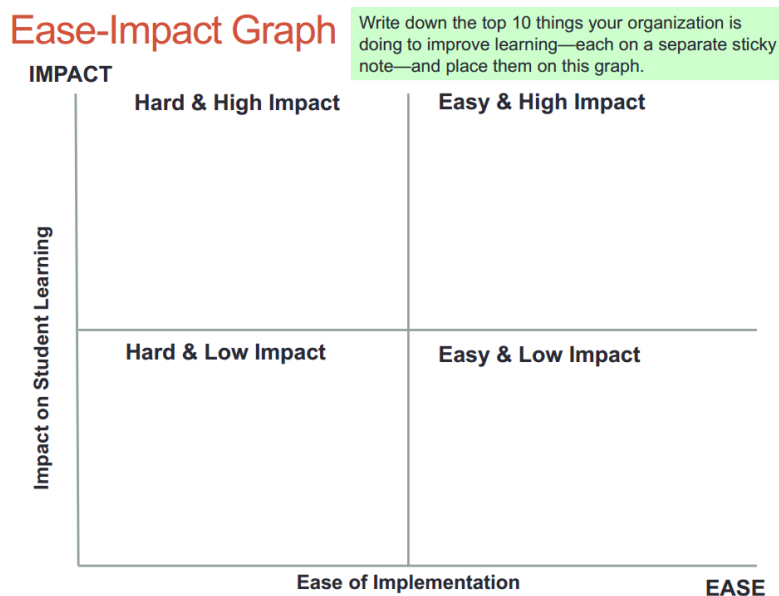
What good strategy is:

- A few, key carefully considered things to focus the system's work on that, when put together, create a powerful engine for systemic improvement
- A series of well-informed, well-educated bets
- It addresses the instructional core
- It balances problem solving with pursuing a vision
- It is developed in partnership; many people feel a sense of ownership of it
- It evolves based on progress made, results, and learning

We also analysed case studies to explore leading change and were given the following 8 step model to use developed by John Kotter, Harvard Business School.

1. Establish a Sense of Urgency
2. Form a Powerful Guiding Coalition
3. Create a Vision
4. Communicate the Vision
5. Empower Others to Act
6. Plan for and Celebrate Short Term Wins
7. Consolidate Improvements and Produce More Change
8. Institutionalize New Approaches

Another key area of leading change was strategic planning and action. One activity involved completing an Ease-Impact Graphic Organiser (see below), which is a useful tool for prioritising actions.



Other tools we were given to maximize efficiency and the use of our time included a Meeting Checklist and Meeting Agenda, both of which I will adapt to suit our various meetings at school. We were also shown levers for changing minds which caused me to reflect on how to construct a message to influence others.

Implications

During the various sessions, in our home groups at the end of each day, and in our PLG we were given the opportunity to reflect on what we had earned and the implications for our own situations. Listed below are outcomes, related to the five sub-themes, that I hope to achieve which I have identified as being relevant to my school leadership and school context.

- 1. Outcomes from sub-theme 'Challenging the underlying beliefs and assumptions that influence our leadership, how we teach, and how we learn'.**
 - Address the areas of my leadership that I identified as needing improvement so myself, the school as a whole, and ultimately the individual learners in the school will benefit as a result.
 - Meet regularly with my PLG to encourage each other to achieve our goals, give feedback, and share strategies for moving forward. This process of self-reflection will be beneficial to other leaders both within our schools and in the educational landscape.
 - Share the model with teachers so they can identify a personal goal to improve their teaching and learning. This would link with our appraisal system.

- 2. Outcomes from sub-theme 'Future focused learning - personalised, ubiquitous learning'.**
 - Continue to provide professional development to staff with regards to e-learning and Inquiry Learning in order to investigate the way students learn both within and outside the school environment, and to provide personalised, ubiquitous learning.
 - To be future focused and continue to develop digital classrooms.
 - To remove barriers to learning and ensure individual pathways to success.
 - To continue to build home/school relationships

- 3. Outcomes from sub-theme 'The importance of effective leadership of school culture'.**
 - Use the framework with staff to clarify the culture we want in our school based on our school vision. Analyse the fundamental beliefs and assumptions, shared values, norms, behaviours, and artifacts related to our school culture.

- 4. Outcomes from sub-theme 'Leading assessment and improving performance'.**
 - Continue to improve on analysing and using data to inform actions and set targets.
 - In particular look at the gap in boys writing and compile a survey for the boys to complete.
 - Up-skill staff with Assembly to continue to analysis data, and to examine trends.
 - Encourage teachers to evaluate their own teaching and learning more effectively using data to inform how they are performing. Continue to use the 'Teaching as Inquiry' process and make time for this valuable reflection.
 - Improve the implementation of our Inquiry Learning programme.

- 5. Outcomes from sub-theme 'Leading Change - strategy'.**
 - Use the Ease-Impact graph to assess our annual goals, and possibly as part

of our strategic planning session for 2015.

- Try to simplify things for greater impact –‘Do less better’.
- Use the 8 step model to lead change - possibly after analysing our school culture.
- Investigate the case-study model of teacher learning and development as we move forward.

Benefits

The benefits of attending the ‘Leadership – an Evolving Vision’ programme at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education are huge. They relate to me personally, to my school, and to the wider Marlborough province.

Firstly the course has enabled me to reflect on and challenge my leadership style. I now have a clearer understanding of my own leadership, and have set leadership goals related to improving teaching and learning. I feel more confident and prepared to lead change, and am motivated to continue the learning touched on at Harvard in order to grow and develop as a leader. The course also enabled me to interact with and make connections with other educational leaders from around the world.

The benefits to my school are many. I have identified several outcomes within my school context that I hope to achieve over time. These outcomes have at their core improved teaching and learning that focuses on increasing student achievement.

The benefits to the wider Marlborough community begin with our Professional Learning Group which relates to approximately 25% of the schools in Marlborough. Collectively the professional learning group is stronger from this experience. We walked and talked leadership and education. We are working as a TEAM (Together everyone achieves more) and intend to have regular contact in order to synthesise and clarify our thinking around education. We are all committed to education in Marlborough and hope this trip will be a catalyst for providing greater opportunities for our students. We intend to present and share our findings and new learning at our upcoming local Principal’s Association Conference, and to encourage and support other principals in our area to have the same experience.

Conclusions

As a result of attending the ‘Leadership – an Evolving Vision’ course I am far more aware of the importance of leading change effectively. Personal and school wide goals need to be identified carefully using researched frameworks. Personal beliefs and assumptions can prevent us from achieving goals and need to be analysed before effective change can occur.

Comparison with the American education system made me grateful for the education system we have in New Zealand where individual school vision and culture is valued, and success for all, formative assessment, and personalised learning is promoted. I realized that we are well down the track and on the right pathway in terms of being future focused and preparing students for the global world we live in. It made me appreciate the wonderful culture that exists in our school, and not to take it for granted. It also highlighted the need to remain current with digital technologies and

how to integrate them effectively into teaching and learning both inside and outside of school.

I know that I need to continually work on maintaining and improving our school culture in order to improve student outcomes, as it was stressed that 'Principals are the most important role in educational improvement'. School leaders work as change agents, continuously seeking to improve educational outcomes for their students (Ministry of Education, 2008).

The New Zealand Curriculum has lifelong learning as part of its vision and this certainly applies to our roles as principals. It is important to undertake high quality professional development and, when possible, have an international perspective which attending this course provided. I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to attend the Harvard Graduate School of Education Principals' Centre Programme 'Leadership: an Evolving Vision' and would highly recommend it to others.

References

Harvard Graduate School of Education Principals' Centre Programme 'Leadership: An Evolving Vision' (Harvard University, Boston, USA)

Presenters and readings in chronological order:

- Robert Kegan | [Including Ourselves in the 'Improvement Equation': Engaging Our Own Immunity to Change](#)
- [Project Adventure](#)
- Chris Dede | [Transforming Education for the 21st Century: Personalized, Ubiquitous Learning](#)
- Gigi Luk | [Development, Learning and Neuroplasticity](#)
- Jon Mundorf | [Universal Design for Learning](#)
- Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell | [Cultural Leadership for Transforming School Organizations](#)
- Kim Marshall | [Effective Use of During-the-Year Assessments](#)
- James Honan | [Using Metrics to Guide Resource Decisions: Potential Lessons from Funders and Philanthropists](#)
- John Richards | [Data, Data Everywhere and Not a Stop to Think](#)
- Leah Plunkett | [Everything You Wanted to Know About Student Privacy – But Were Afraid to Ask!](#)
- Liz City | [Strategy in Action](#)
- Hunter Gehlbach | [Survey 2.0: More Accurately Measuring What Matters](#)
- Joseph Blatt | [Challenges Redux](#)
- Kay Merseth | [Case Discussion: Supporting Beginning Teachers in Instruction](#)

Ministry of Education. (2008) *Kiwi Leadership for Principals: Leading the New Zealand Way: Regional Leadership*