FOCUS

Rural and urban schools with rolls less than a hundred and how they are managing a variety of common issues.

SPENCER BATY
TAPU SCHOOL
THAMES

Sabbatical Report Term 3 2006

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Spencer Baty, Principal of Tapu School a U 1 decile 2 school on the Thames Coast, was awarded a Primary Principals' Sabbatical Award for Term 3 2006.

Prior to commencing the principalship of Tapu School on the 7th of June 2005 Spencer had been principal of a U7 decile 10 large urban school for nearly seventeen years. Prior to that he had been a rural schools' adviser for two years and principal of four other rural schools.   He completed a Master of Education Thesis on Rural School Principalship.

It would be fair to say that since the 7th of June the transition back to rural school principalship has been challenging and interesting. This sabbatical was timely for him and his present stage of principalship of Tapu School.

While there was the obvious element of "refreshment" for him, the main benefits will be using the information gained in order to take Tapu School forward in the next five years and ideas to share with other small school principals.

Wayne Howes, ICT cluster facilitator, assisted with the identification of schools and his advice was invaluable in guiding the initial selection of schools to visit.
Fifteen schools were studied in the Coromandel, Hauraki Plains, Waikato and Rotorua area. The size and deciles of the schools varied, with the spread as follows.

SIZE:	
Roll up to 40	2
41 to 65	5
66 to 90	3
91 +	5

DECILE		
	2	1 school
	4	2 schools
5		4 schools
6		3 schools
7		2 schools
8		2 schools
9		1 school

The requirement to spend at least half of the sabbatical time engaged in the project has been exceeded as has the budget for travel originally approved by the Board of Trustees. This was partly because of the upsurge in petrol costs.

On one of the visits the Board Chairperson accompanied the researcher. This provided a valuable insight for the Board and helped to give the project even more credibility with the Trustees.

The key findings of this project will be of interest to many teaching principals and hopefully some of the policy makers.

The views and opinions voiced in the report are entirely those of the recipient.

GENERAL REPORT

PURPOSES:

To investigate six key themes in fifteen North Island small rural and urban schools. The themes will be of particular interest to Tapu School and of general interest to other small schools.
The themes for study were :

1. The use of ICT in rural schools
2. Resource Management in rural schools
3. Quality and moderation of standards of children's work in rural schools
4. Issues relating to administration, management, property and finance in small schools

5. Reporting and communication within the small school and community.
6. Performance management in small schools .

Plus any emerging themes that may be worthy of further research

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Prior to commencing the principalship of Tapu School on the 7th of June 2005 I had been principal of a U7 decile 10 large urban school for nearly seventeen years. Prior to that I had been a rural schools' adviser for two years and principal of four other rural schools. My Master of Education thesis was on Rural School Principalship.

It would be fair to say that since the 7th of June the transition back to rural school principalship has been challenging and interesting. This sabbatical was timely for me and my present stage of principalship of Tapu School.

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THE APPROACH

The approach used to collect data for this project was a simple face to face interview using a structured set of interview questions.
I am particularly grateful to the schools visited for their hospitality. It was an absolute pleasure visiting so many schools where the principals were obviously proud of what they are doing. A typical visit included visiting the school, meeting the principal, looking at the layout of the school and touring the classrooms, then the interview. Usually, following the interview there was a good deal of informal discussion about education in small schools .

The intention was to look for patterns and trends in the data gathered and these are reported on. Also, I was very interested in the perceived creative, innovative, unique and different strategies used to manage every day situations in small schools. On a number of occasions I found myself asking " why didn't I think of that (idea)?" Some of these gems are also mentioned in this report.

During the field work I briefly outlined some of my experiences on Leadspace, in the forum for Teaching Principals. This, at times, stimulated some interesting discussion.

FINDINGS

The findings from the research are organised around eight headings. The six previously identified issues, plus two additional issues that emerged as the interviews were conducted.

The Use of ICT in small schools.

Networked		!00%
Suite of computers	33%	
Using an Inquiry model		33%
At least one data projector	73%	
Operational website	53%	
Smart Board (s)		53%
Some form of child access to internet	93%	

Technical support

- school secretary	13%	
- parent		20%
- Principal		20%
- Teacher		26%
- Teacher Aide		6%
- ICT co-ordinator	6%	
- other	6%	

The data suggests some interesting trends :

1. All schools visited had a form of net working.
2. Only 33% had a suite of computers but a number of the schools explained they had moved away from this concept wanting to get the majority of their hardware in to the classrooms.
3. The Inquiry Model has a reasonably strong following in smaller schools. Although only 33% actually demonstrated their version of the model (and some I believe were quite stunning) a number of other schools were currently working on adapting the model to suit their needs.
4. A high percentage (73%) had at least one data projector, used mainly for presentations and projection of internet material for the class to see.
5. Just over half the schools visited had operational websites. Several others either had sites but they were not using them or were currently revising them.

Other schools had moved away from having a website, to using Knowledge Net for this purpose. Reasons for not having websites ranged from principals not having time to maintain them, not knowing how to set one up, thinking parents would not look at it, to a community where some families didn't have access to either power or telephones.

6. The issue of technical support was an interesting one with no real pattern emerging, although it could be argued that in 46% of the schools either a teacher or the teaching principal assumed this responsibility. Isolation of some schools meant that it had to be a serious problem before machines were taken to the nearest town.
7. The most serious issue concerning schools spoken to regarding ICT was the cost. Many of these principals appear to be very skilled at sourcing funding from Charitable Trusts. Some of the higher decile schools had the power to raise significant amounts of money locally to support their ICT programmes.

Resource Management :

A common problem in small schools is the question of storage and management of resources. During the visits to schools I was also interested in how they coped with this problem. (one school was considering buying a container and placing it permanently on site as a cheap solution to this problem!)
Three areas were focussed on: libraries, storage of journals and storage of general teaching resources.

Libraries: The majority of schools appeared to have fairly recently carried out a major culling of library books to help over come this problem and also to try and put quality, colourful books in front of the children.
Schools responded as follows to my questions about the management of their libraries.

Is the library automated?   Yes   53%

Who is responsible for day
to day running of it ?

Teacher	46%
Secretary or Teacher Aide	26%
Are senior children trained and used ?	33%

Resources :

93% of schools had a separate room for resource storage .

School Journals :

While these are a high quality resource for schools they do create a problem for schools from the point of view of storage.
The general approach to overcoming this problem seemed to be to keep full sets from a certain date and keep an archive copy of each issue before that date. Schools would revisit and re-cull about every five years. The cut off point ranged from 1975 to 1995 in the schools visited.

53%   1975 – 1985
47%   1986 – 1995

Moderation of children's work :

The purpose of this section of the research was to identify ways that different schools use to make sure that their learners are achieving at a fair level for their age and class. I expected principals to say that in their local clusters or principals' groups they exchange samples of work and assess and analyse them and discuss the quality of the work.

However the findings were interesting and are set out on the following table.

Feedback from Literacy Advisors	5
Use of the exemplars	9
Use of standardised tests	11

Benchmarking internally	1
Feedback from local High School/ College	4

One school annually surveyed the parents of its previous year's leavers to High School at the end of Term one to ascertain how well their children were coping at the next level. They were also questioned as to whether there was anything the primary school could do better to prepare their children for year 9.

Management Issues :

Performance Management:

Schools reported that all teaching staff have clearly stated job descriptions and that all principals were involved in the process of appraising the teaching staff. The focus of appraisals of teachers in 93% of cases was the professional standards for teachers, plus up to four goals.

73% of schools ensured that these goals were based on the school's targets set in their strategic plan.
27% based the teacher goals on personal professional development needs of teachers.
In one of the larger schools in the sample the principal attested to the achievement of the professional standards of each teacher and the Deputy Principal attested to the achievement of each teacher's goals.
Thus two senior staff members were involved in the process of classroom observation.

Principal appraisal was seen as important in the fifteen schools.Three different approaches were used.

Appraisal carried out by the chairperson	33%
Appraisal carried out by an outside consultant or consultant principal	60%
Appraisal carried out by a sub-committee	7%

A number of schools used a combination of these approaches on a three year cycle. Others (60%) felt that a less vigorous approach to the appraisal of the principal could be used in a year when the school is visited by the Education Review Office.

Other issues :

At the conclusion of each visit principals were asked two additional questions." What do they see as the greatest challenge being the principal of a small school?" And," What is the most rewarding part of their role?"

Greatest challenge:

Enough time to do the job properly	35%
Balancing the load ie Teacher	
Principal	
Person	33%
Managing the limited funding	30%
Family problems, poor parenting	
Transience	35%

Plus a number of other issues were deemed to be challenging including personnel issues, finding good staff, relievers, lack of teachers able to commit to programmes like Reading Recovery.
Also,

- being able to maintain - and understand traditions in some small communities.
- Very strong ownership of rural schools by their communities.
- Teachers living in school houses feeling like they are in a goldfish bowl and on call 24/7.
- Problems relating to support services – availability, funding and lack of understanding of issues that small schools face.
- A number of principals in smaller and more rural schools valued the opportunity to talk with a colleague from a similar type of school . Raising the issue of the value of an advisor being available to such schools, on request, rather like the former Rural Schools' Advisor, rather than the current principals' advisor model.
- The need for small schools to depend heavily on charities to provide the basics for the school while the larger schools see the charities and similar sources of funding as providing extras, the icing on the cake!

One special comment was that small school principals find it a challenge to find time to lead because in the time available they are busy teaching and managing. Several commented that they never quite felt they were a teacher or a principal This point will be picked up further in the key findings section of this report.

Most rewarding aspects:

70% of principals quite clearly stated that the most rewarding aspect of principalship in smaller schools was being able to make a difference to children's learning in an

environment where they could monitor it over time as children progess through the school.

Other rewarding issues mentioned include the satisfaction from getting support from the community, moving staff on in their careers and at times getting them out of their comfort zone, and strong team work in situations where staffing is generally stable.

Those principals of larger schools in the sample acknowledged that in a position where the principal has more than 50% non teaching time they are able to see the big picture of the direction the school should be taking. This opportunity to think strategically was clearly obvious in the schools where principals had the time to reflect and plan for a desired future for their organisation. Conversely those principals with a teaching load of more than 50% believed their classroom teaching responsibilities were impacting on their efforts to think strategically.

There are opportunities in smaller schools for a greater percentage of children to take on responsibility and experience really authentic learning

Key Findings :

1. All schools visited had a form of net working.
2. Only 33% had a suite of computers but a number of the schools explained they had moved away from this concept wanting to get the majority of their hardware in to the classrooms.
3. Just over half the schools visited had operational websites. Several others either had sites but they were not using them or were currently revising them. Other schools had moved away from having a website, to using Knowledge Net for this purpose. Reasons for not having websites ranged from principals not having time to maintain them, not knowing how to set one up, thinking parents would not look at it, to a community where some families didn't have access to either power or telephones.
4. The most serious issue concerning schools spoken to regarding ICT was the cost. Many of these principals appear to be very skilled at sourcing funding from Charitable Trusts Some of the. higher decile schools had the power to raise significant amounts of money locally to support their ICT programmes.
5. Libraries: The majority of schools appeared to have fairly recently carried out a major culling of library books to help overcome this problem and also to try and put quality, colourful books in front of the children.
6. One school annually surveyed the parents of its previous year's leavers to High School at the end of Term one to ascertain how well their children were coping at the next level. They were also questioned as to whether there was anything the primary school could do better to prepare their children for year.
7. In one of the larger schools in the sample the principal attested to the achievement of the professional standards of each teacher and the Deputy Principal attested to the achievement of each teacher's goals. Thus two senior staff members were involved in the process of classroom observation.
8. Principal appraisal was seen as important in the fifteen schools.

a. A number of schools used a combination of approaches on a three year cycle. Others (60%) felt that a less vigorous approach to the appraisal of the principal could be used in a year when the school is visited by the Education Review Office.

9. Greatest challenges:

   a. Enough time to do the job properly   35%
   b. Balancing the load ie
      - Teacher
      - Principal
      - Person   33%
   c. Managing the limited funding   30%
   d. Family problems, poor parenting
   e. Transience   35%

   Plus a number of other issues were deemed to be challenging including personnel issues, finding good staff, relievers, lack of teachers able to commit to programmes like Reading Recovery.

10. Problems relating to support services – availability, funding and lack of understanding by these people of issues that small schools face.
11. A number of principals in smaller and more rural schools valued the opportunity to talk with a colleague from a similar type of school, raising the issue of the value of an advisor being available to such schools, on request, rather like the former Rural Schools' Advisor, as an option to the current principals' advisor model and First time principals courses.
12. The need for small schools to depend heavily on charities to provide the basics for the school while the larger schools see the charities and similar sources of funding as providing extras - the icing on the cake!
13. One special comment was that small school principals find it a challenge to find time to lead because in the time available they are busy teaching and managing. Several commented that they never quite felt they were a teacher or a principal.
14. Being able to maintain, and understand, traditions in some small communities.

15. Very strong ownership of rural schools by their communities .
16. 70% of principals quite clearly stated that the most rewarding aspect of principalship in smaller schools was being able to make a difference to children's learning in an environment where they could monitor it over time as children progess through the school.
17. Other rewarding issues mentioned include the satisfaction from getting support from the community.
15. Those principals of larger schools in the sample acknowledged that in a position where the principal has more than 50% non teaching time they are able to see the big picture of the direction the school should be taking. This

opportunity to think strategically was clearly obvious in the schools where principals had the time to reflect and plan for a desired future for their organisation. Conversely those principals with a teaching load of more than 50% believed their classroom teaching responsibilities were clouding their efforts to think strategically.

16. There are opportunities in smaller schools for a greater percentage of children to take on responsibility and experience authentic learning

CONSIDERATIONS:

The following are suggestions that policy makers and stakeholders may like to think about when considering how smaller schools might be further assisted

1. The issue of ICT in smaller schools is an expensive concern for them. It begins with the challenge of keeping up to date with appropriate hardware, appropriate technical support and adequate professional development. All small schools visited where attempting to do this on a shoe string, by using charities or preferring to put their limited funds in to other areas.

2 Small schools need to be encouraged to develop a dialogue with their local secondary schools securing feedback on how their students are prepared for and adapting to the next level.

3. While performance management of principals and staff was carried out in all schools in the study there appeared to be a general lack of rigor in the process. Further professional development in this area could result in the process of performance management empowering staff and facilitating meaningful school improvement

4. Group Special Education were perceived as lacking empathy with and understanding of the differing needs of the smaller schools visited. Research into this is necessary to establish the size of the problem. One of the main concerns principals expressed was the issue of transience, poor parenting and family problems.

5. Principals in small schools need time to think and plan strategically. If the majority of their time is targeted on their role as classroom teacher it is very difficult to lead the strategic direction of the school. First time principals in smaller schools need help in how to use effectively the time they do get for leadership.

6. Consideration needs to be given to supporting small school principals by a mentor experienced in small school leadership. A model involving a small schools advisor available on request – similar to the earlier Advisor to Rural Schools might be successful.

Finallly this wonderful opportunity for principals could be further enhanced if two things could happen

*   Each award accompanied by a small grant to avoid additional costs to the principal

*   Each recipient to have a mentor or someone from the Ministry to check in with and interact with. during the course of the sabbatical.

Nowhere is it more relevant than in smaller schools that,

...It takes a whole village to educate a child...