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Madeline Gunn

Epsom Girls Grammar School

Topic of Investigation: leadership of very large (>2000 students) secondary schools.

As the populations of our cities, particularly Auckland, increase and the cost of buying land and building new schools increase, the pressure will be to grow the size of existing schools. Already in Auckland there are 11 schools which have more than 2000 students plus one in Hamilton and one in Christchurch.

These very large schools are different from primary schools, which have provided much of the research on school leadership, and from smaller secondary schools. I have tried to identify those major differences and what this means for the role of the principal in these schools. I hope this might contribute to the literature on instructional leadership in very large secondary schools and on the particular tasks of the principal in these.

Method

I interviewed 11 principals about their leadership of their large secondary school to learn what challenges they saw in the role, how they distributed leadership, what they saw was essential for them personally to contribute and what had best prepared them for this role. Six of the schools are co-educational, three are boys only and two are girls only. Eight of the principals are male and three are female.

Literature Review

New Zealand principals are very aware of the meta-analyses of Robinson et al (2009) which identify the leadership practices that impact most strongly on improving student achievement. Those with the greatest impact are:

1. Promoting and participating in teaching learning and development (0.84)
2. Establishing goals and expectations (0.42)
3. Planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum (0.42)
4. Strategic resourcing (0.31)
5. Establishing a safe and orderly environment for both staff and students (0.27)

Of the 27 studies analysed, only four were in secondary schools so the question of the differences in instructional leadership between primary and secondary schools was not answered by this work. The focus was also on leadership practices regardless of who carried them out so the unique contribution of the principal cannot be answered from this data.

In *Leadership and Learning* (2011) Robinson et al acknowledge the numerous researchers who have warned that research carried out in primary schools should not be generalised to the secondary school setting. They suggest instructional leadership might function differently in secondary schools because of their size, differentiation around specialist subjects and the age of their students.

The principal of a secondary school is more removed from individual teachers because of the number of staff and their specialist knowledge in diverse areas. Many leadership tasks are delegated to a hierarchy of deputies and credible instructional leadership is provided by heads of department

at middle management level. Highfield et al (2013) shows the importance of this in proving that effective middle management can produce differentiated student outcomes even with the same student cohort within a school.

The influence of the secondary principal is more indirect as (s)he works through these other people and also creates the norms and routines that ensure quality teaching and learning across the whole school. Bendikson et al (2012) say "the principal's instructional leadership is exercised by organising and managing the school – everything from student management, timetables and resource and staffing allocation to professional development policies.--- These managerial functions are the bedrock of principal instructional leadership in secondary schools." (p.3) The defining factor which makes these instructional leadership is when the emphasis is on" *academic press* or the press for the achievement of all students." (p. 4)

Secondary schools need to cater for the more diverse needs of their adolescent students in offering different pathways. Firestone and Herriot (1982) point out that whereas a primary principal can act more as a head coach of a sports team, a secondary principal's role is more like a CEO of a corporation because the work of the school is much more diverse than in a primary school. Robinson et al (2011) describe the secondary principal as the conductor of the orchestra "one who does more coordinating than actually carrying out direct instructional leadership practices." (p.136).

However, although the influence of the secondary principal's instructional leadership is a more indirect one, Robinson et al (2011) claim the degree of it still discriminates between more and less effective schools. They suggest that secondary principals work through creating the organisational and social conditions that enable middle leaders to have productive conversations with teachers about teaching and learning. In addition Bendikson et al (2012) conclude that principals of higher performing secondary schools are good goal setters, strong problem solvers and strategic users of resources.

Leithwood et al (2004) stress the contingent nature of leadership. They state that geographic location, level of schooling and size of school can all have important implications for what successful leadership means in that context.

The literature above has focused on the differences between leadership of primary and secondary schools but in my investigation I have looked at the differences in leading a very large secondary school, over 2000 students, when compared with leading a smaller secondary school..

Challenges in a very large school

1. **Sense of belonging**

When a school has more than 2000 students and possibly 250 staff, a major challenge is that people do not feel they belong. All schools visited have different structures to divide both students and staff into smaller groups with which they can identify.

Seven of the 11 schools have a vertical student management system which allows students to bond across year levels. Those which have horizontal groupings have strong systems which focus on each year level. Staff may identify with a whanau or house grouping as the students do or may have a closer bond with their subject group lead by a Head of Department/Faculty.

All schools are aware of this issue and have various programmes and strategies to build a culture of belonging in the school.

2. Shared vision, values and strategy

These are compulsory for all schools but in a very large school they must be clear to everyone involved as this is a means of bringing people together to work in an agreed direction. Expectations have to be clear and policies and procedures understood to provide security and safety for all. Principals moving from smaller schools noted the increased importance of a more corporate culture.

3. Distributive Leadership

Robinson et al (2011) discuss the need for specialised instructional leadership to come from middle managers with whom the principal may work. In a very large school this direct relationship is not possible and is delegated to senior leaders. The principal must then work mainly with those leaders to know what is happening with teachers in each department. Principals do also meet as a group with their middle managers to discuss more strategic issues relating to curriculum and learning. This is their opportunity to be more directly involved in *academic press*. In a large school the number of individual Heads of Department makes discussion and decision making difficult so a Faculty or Learning Area model is usually used for this consultation.

Whereas the distribution of leadership at middle management level is reasonably standard, schools have different structures at senior leadership level. The number of roles in the senior leadership teams of the 11 schools studied, not including the principal, ranges from 4 – 7 with 6 being the mode. The staffing units used to reward these teams ranges from 40 to 58 with 49 being the mean.

The bulk of these leadership roles are at Deputy Principal level with 4 schools having Assistant Principals in the team. The interesting difference is whether schools have a flat structure of deputy principals or have chosen to appoint one or more Associate Principals.

Two schools have two Associates, in one to lead different levels of the school, in the other to cover curriculum and day to day organisation. Both schools have recently restructured to take more operational responsibility off the principal to allow him to work more strategically. Each Associate Principal has a clearly defined team with whom (s)he works.

In another seven schools the Associate Principal role is identified as a senior deputy principal or even a second principal. People in these roles have responsibility for school-wide portfolios such as operations (5), teaching and learning (1), curriculum and property (1). Most principals did not see the role as that of second principal as they felt the school should have only one principal who is the symbolic leader. One school had recently disestablished the Associate role when the incumbent left preferring to use the units to appoint two more deputies and to have a flat structure.

The relationship between the Associate and the Principal is crucial to the success of the role. They will work together more closely than the Principal and the other members of the team. The Associate will be an expert advising the Principal on some matters, providing a sounding board for his/her ideas and supporting him/her in the demanding role. In a team of similarly experienced deputies the principal may choose to keep a flat structure but where one or two members are more experienced, this role can provide a development opportunity as well as support for the Principal. However trust is essential and the decision is often made based on the relationship which exists with the Principal. The role will not provide support if trust is questioned.

In one school the Associate Principal role was used traditionally to groom a successor for the Principal. In four schools the Associate was promoted to the Principal position but it is acknowledged that not all people in the positon want that promotion for a variety of reasons.

4. **Communication**

Communication is important in all schools but essential in very large schools where so many people have to know what is planned to happen. It is also essential for the leadership of the school to have clearly defined forums for communication and planning.

All of the schools investigated had regular meetings with the senior leadership team for defined purposes. Most had shorter early morning meetings with no set agenda to discuss operational issues. These ranged from 5 – 30 minutes and occurred 2 - 5 times per week.

Where there was an Associate Principal, this person often chaired a meeting once a week with the team to focus on operational issues. The Associate and the Principal would usually meet daily to update and plan and the Principal and the SLT would meet once per week for strategic issues.

Where there was no Associate, there were usually two meetings per week with the Principal and whole team and the goal was to focus on more strategic issues where an agenda was often set in advance. These meetings lasted 1 – 2 hours.

Meetings with the Principal, senior leadership team and middle managers, usually Heads of Faculties rather than Heads of Department, occurred weekly or fortnightly.

Some Principals met regularly with individual Deputy Principals to keep in touch with their work and to coach them in their roles. One principal had completed a coaching course to develop skills in this area and during my sabbatical I did the same.

Some schools regularly plan a strategic meeting every term or semester to review progress on goals and to modify plans where necessary.

5. **Systems**

Because of the very large number of staff and students who need to be organised, systems in these schools have to be very strong and understood by all. Principals who moved from a smaller school noticed this as a major issue. There is no room for laxness. Strong systems help new people settle into a large organisation.

6. **Resourcing**

Burnside High School opened in 1960 and around 1967, when the roll was around 1000, the decision was made to grow it rather than to build a new school to cope with increasing numbers of baby boomers. The increase planned was around 250 per year. To grow a school to this size was an experiment and the first two principals of the school had many battles with the then Education Board over resourcing. The economies of scale anticipated did not become a reality.

In 2012 the Secondary Schools Staffing Group found that large secondary schools are under - resourced in terms of entitlement staffing and are systematically disadvantaged in terms of very large classes. The figures they established for underfunding of schools in the investigated group ranged from 12 – 20 teachers. The number of extra staff schools are actually paying for ranged from 5 – 22 with the mean being 14.

The Group recommended that the staffing formula should be reviewed to address this anomaly and that the management and guidance entitlement components were reviewed to see if they were actually adequate for the needs of the school. The then Secretary of Education accepted this recommendation but no progress has been made on this in spite of two approaches from schools to the Minister.

The outcome is that very large schools have to provide extra staffing from their own resources if they are to be near the required 1:26 staff:student ratio. This is not easy and schools with strong PPTA representation have to find ways of compensating teachers if their average is over 26.

International students provide a richness to a school's student body and an internationalisation for domestic students. However, very large schools have had to establish large and sophisticated departments and systems to attract and manage the large numbers of international students whose fees can help their staffing. The schools investigated had 55 – 400 international students with a mean of 194.

Several of the schools are involved in serious fundraising and have a Foundation to guide this. Others are planning to develop this structure as they do not feel they can rely on government funding to meet the expectations of their communities.

7. Culture

Because these schools are so large a strong culture is essential in proving the glue to hold everything together, to help people feel they belong. Students, parents and staff have to feel this is a successful school which is worth belonging to. If they do not feel this, in many cases the school will lose popularity and no longer be in this very large category.

All of the points discussed above contribute to identifying and building the culture of the school and the Principal in particular is paramount in promoting and reinforcing that culture.

The particular role of the Principal in a very large school

When asked what they saw as their main role in the school, the principals interviewed had a variety of responses:

- Thinking strategically - 7
- Crafting, supporting and promoting the culture - 5
- Making the decisions which are too hard for everyone else – 3
- Being visible as the figurehead
- Being a role model to staff
- Dealing with high level problems
- Being connected to the needs
- Setting goals and expectations
- Ensuring there is alignment in all that is happening
- Being involved in external relationships
- Communicating with key people
- Pushing the teaching and learning through others

- Meeting with senior leaders and leaders of learning
- Supporting staff but keeping pressure on under-performing staff
- Appointing the right people into the school
- Coaching, mentoring others
- Supporting people to develop in non-judgemental ways
- Grooming people for principalship

The principals were asked to rank on a scale of 1-10 (10 being most important) the major tasks of principalship identified by Robinson et al (2009) in terms of those they felt they needed to be personally involved in. The collective ranking was:

1. Establishing goals and expectations
2. Resourcing strategically
3. Engaging in constructive problem talk
4. Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment
5. Creating educationally powerful connections
6. Planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum
7. Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development
8. Selecting, developing and using smart tools

This ranking reflects the comments made about their major tasks. There is no specific reference to culture but this could be included in the expectations of the first task.

Principals were aware that 6 and 7 have a powerful impact on student outcomes but they were confident that this had been delegated to competent people. Their influence was an indirect one in working with their leaders of learning and in the ways discussed by Bendikson et al (2012).

Challenges for principals of very large schools

1. **Knowing students and staff**

All principals had accepted and regretted that they could not know many of their students. They knew those who shone in different areas and those who were in serious trouble. One principal who had been in the school since it had grown from 1200 to 2200 said that beyond 1750 knowing people was more difficult. Another who had moved from a school of 1700 was surprised at the difference in a school of 2500. There was less time to spend with students and staff as a more corporate model was required.

All principals would like to spend time in classes but few achieved it on a regular basis. Some delegated that to their senior leaders and kept a check on visits. One visited all Year 9 classes in Term 1 so they knew who he was. One senior student interviewed felt that the new Principal was very popular because he was approachable and showed an interest in what they were doing in different areas of school life. Students knew he could not know them all but he treated them as equals and was not superior to them.

Knowing staff can be difficult particularly if there is a reasonably high turnover which can happen for a variety of reasons. For example in girls' schools there is always a number of staff on parental leave for one, two or more years. Some principals were involved in every academic staff appointment made in the school whereas others had trust in their senior leaders' decisions which they approved for basic level positions. However, all thought it important to meet the new staff member albeit briefly. One observed every new member teach and another interviewed each one after a term in the school. A staff survey taken after a less successful principal appointment showed that staff

wanted a principal who would talk to them and know their names. To feel you are known and you belong is a very basic human need.

2. **Sharing Control**

Principals moving from smaller schools were surprised at the difference in style needed in a very large school. One found that he had less control and had to communicate well to be able to work through other people. Another found he could effect change more quickly in his smaller school and different skills were needed to take people with him in the larger one. The principal who had lived through the school's growth said "over 1750 you start to lose touch." Another very experienced principal said his team has grown through osmosis through their many meetings and he has not made a unilateral decision on his own for years.

3. **Working through other people**

Different skills of collaboration are needed to trust others to do much of the work for you. Many principals have a primary interest in learning for students and for staff but they need to encourage and support others to drive it. One principal who is very focused on teaching and learning had come to accept, "you can't be the instructional leader to everyone. Be a leader of leaders and allow it to happen."

One of the advantages of a larger school is that there is often more support for non-teaching areas of the school. The budgets and property developments are large and need professional support. However, principals still need to understand what is happening and many see it as important that their deputies are introduced to these areas.

4. **Filling the strategic and instructional role**

For some principals beginning in the role it can be difficult to take a strategic view. One was conscious that in his first two years he was very operational as he could see so many things which needed changing. Since then he has developed an Associate Principal who can fill this role and he has managed to step into the strategic one. Others had similar experiences especially if they were wanting to make a change to a strongly entrenched culture in the school. If they had little support for change in their leadership team, this was extremely difficult. The Principal cannot work alone and time must be spent engaging the team.

However, the strategic role must include instructional leadership. One principal had followed a leader who had worked purely at the strategic level as a heroic leader and had little interest in what happened with students or learning. The new principal's own style of shared ownership was perceived by many as a weakness and it has taken time to develop the learning organisation he envisaged. Another realised with hindsight that he should have made some early strategic changes to signify his leadership rather than waiting two years until he fully understood where he wanted to go. Again this was perceived as a weakness. The role of symbolic leadership, being the figurehead, is one which has a high importance in a large school but credible instructional leadership is also essential if student outcomes are to improve.

5. **Finding work/life balance**

Leading a school with over 2000 students and 250 staff is very demanding. In order to develop external relationships for the school and to be visible at school functions there is much work in the evenings for principals on top of a long school day. Few have time for any interests or hobbies

outside of work but many are happy being fully involved in school. They do admit to getting tired and to struggling to manage stress. Much of the work can involve responding to the needs of other people but those of the Principal must be considered also. As one principal stated," I'm trying to be kinder to myself."

Successors to principals of large schools.

Of the 11 principals interviewed 6 had been appointed externally after being principal of a smaller school, 4 had been promoted internally from a deputy or associate position and one had been promoted externally from a deputy principal position.

Several principals of smaller schools who had been promoted to a larger one were surprised at the difference in the job as has been discussed above. Not knowing students, managing so many staff, having less direct control, having to distribute leadership more effectively, having to communicate more formally, having to ensure policies, procedures and systems were strong and understood by all to avoid safety issues were the most mentioned issues. They had the experience of doing the job but had to learn a different style in a very large school and adapt to a new, often very strong, culture.

Those principals who had been promoted internally had the advantage of knowing the school culture and being used to the special features of leadership in such a school. Given the breadth of distributive leadership required there they had sound experience and had sometimes been groomed for the new role by the previous principal. The one principal who had been promoted from a deputy position in another large school found the transition very challenging.

The principals interviewed identified one of their most important tasks was promoting the culture of the school. Several were nervous that when they left an outside appointment could threaten that culture. One very experienced principal felt the culture of collaborative decision making was crucial to his school and he feared that a different style would threaten the stability of the school.

In recent years three very large schools experienced such instability when a new principal was appointed. In each case a principal from a smaller school did not adapt their style to meet the different demands and their tenure finished after a short time.

In some situations a change of culture is needed for a school to move forward. Three of the schools are currently involved in this, each being led by an experienced principal from a smaller school. The greatest challenge for each of these principals has been to establish a senior leadership team which can strategically and actively share the task.

Leading a very large school in New Zealand is a demanding but fulfilling task. The skills required can be developed through experience as a principal in a smaller school or as a senior leader in a very large school, providing leadership has been distributed effectively. A successful candidate will have a style which suits the culture of the school, if that is wanted to be continued, or the skills to build support to change the culture, if that is the goal.

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