

Principal Sabbatical Report, 2017

Suzanne Billington, Tauriko School

My Investigation:

To inquire into what possible designs for structured leadership learning would support Middle and Senior leaders in schools to carry out their leadership roles effectively to support 21st Century learning and teaching and grow them as leaders in their schools

Acknowledgments:

I would like to sincerely thank the staff, Board of Trustees and community of Tauriko School for supporting my sabbatical and for allowing me the time to investigate an area of particular interest professionally. The time to rest, reflect, clarify my thinking and re-energize myself through time away from the everyday work of my school has been much valued by me and I know the learning I have undertaken will be valuable for the future growth of leadership in my school.

Thank you to Jeremy Kedian for challenging me to clarify my thinking around what I wanted to focus my learning time in this sabbatical on.

Thanks also to Andrea Ford (Institute of Professional Learning, University of Waikato) for her support through my learning journey.

I would like to thank Deputy Principals from our local school cluster for sharing their leadership journeys with me and discussing their thinking around growing leadership in schools. I would also like to thank the Principals in my local Principals cluster for discussing how they grow leaders in their schools and possibilities they see for this in the future. Our cluster is made up of a wide range of schools both small and large, rural and urban, with teaching and non-teaching Principals leading these. Two of the Principals lead private schools.

I would particularly like to thank Lisa Rose, my Deputy Principal, who lead our school superbly in my absence from school.

Introduction:

Leading in a New Zealand school is complex and in a 21st Century environment it involves leading and managing constant change. This change is demanded by Government policy, Ministry requirements and the communities we serve. Beyond this, in a perfect world we also wish to make positive change in response to a range of data related to the students we teach. We want to make decisions based on reliable evidence which will improve learning for all students in our schools.

“the fundamental challenge for school leaders across the system is to raise achievement and reduce disparity in ways that prepare all our students for the future”, (Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009). We know that leadership is second only to quality teaching in the classroom in impacting on student achievement. There is a huge responsibility on leaders in this environment to act with moral purpose in order that social and educational goals for all students are met. Growing leaders that can work in this environment, contribute innovatively to school improvement and have a positive impact on our county’s future through the success of students in our care is important work.

As I applied for this sabbatical, I was focussed on having the time to think about how I might grow the leaders in our school in a way that is more structured. I worried about the “just in time” learning conversations we had, although valuable, being more reactive than proactive in terms of growing leaders. The business of school life often meant little time for reflection. I had also just begun trialling “leadership workshops” for middle leaders, which I lead or are led by a facilitator. We also utilised other strategies for growing leaders - sending them on leadership courses out of school related to areas of their leadership they wished to enhance, I shared professional readings with staff related to our school’s strategic direction or their leadership growth and we develop professional learning design in our school that provides leadership learning as a component of this.

At the end of 2016 the National Aspiring Principals Programme (NAPP) in New Zealand was brought to a close. In my discussions with middle and senior leaders over my sabbatical, very few of them wish to take on the Principal role. All found their roles demanding and questioned the sustainability of their work in schools over time. They saw the principal’s role as being more demanding and weren’t keen to take this on.

All of this does not bode well for Principal leadership in New Zealand into the future. What opportunities or possibilities are there then for ensuring the growth of strong, effective leadership within and across our schools and what might this look like?

Methodology:

- Interviewing of Deputy Principals and Assistant Principals about their own leadership learning, events that have informed and supported their good practice and about what they believe should support them to grow their leadership capacity
- Exploring with a group of Principals the type of growth they would like for their middle and senior leaders that would support them and their school.
- Focused reading programme
- Development of a leadership learning design for our school which might be transferable to other school contexts

Findings:

Discussions with Assistant, Deputy Leaders and Principals were a valuable exercise. It was clear of course that all schools have different contexts in which we work. Common themes did emerge however.

Themes from Assistant and Deputy Principals were:

Useful learning opportunities that support our leadership growth –

- Leadership facilitators working with lead staff in a school in an on-going way is worthwhile for learning. There can be at times a difficulty in knowing who quality facilitators might be.
- Curriculum leadership papers through University can support leadership growth
- DP networks are important for networking and sharing of knowledge
- Curriculum leadership roles
- Leadership conversations regularly with our Principal

Challenges in leadership are:

- Having enough time to reflect on leadership

- The workload of middle and senior leaders, a lot of work is done at night
- Complexity of children we work with
- Helicopter parents and parent expectations
- The need to counsel both students and parents
- Other teachers' perceptions of what our role is when we are released
- Balancing the need to distribute leadership without overloading middle leaders
- Leaders who have a teaching component as well as leadership responsibilities have a huge role
- Expectations on schools are making leadership roles unsustainable

Important skills, qualities, understandings that we think Middle and Senior Leaders need to have in schools:

- Interpersonal skills – good listener
- Decisive, don't procrastinate, be strong – know when to draw a line in the sand
- Clear vision
- Passion for the role
- To model being a learner, actively be a learner
- Work collaboratively
- Be authentic
- Have compassion
- Act with integrity
- Develop respect – walk the talk, be visible

In an ideal world, leaders in schools should be supported to grow their leadership expertise by:

- Visiting other schools
- Networking with colleagues doing a similar job
- Having a quality person to facilitate leadership growth in our school
- Professional Learning in our own district
- Going away geographically as part of different networks to see how other areas work eg SENCO

Themes from Principals were:

Ways in which we currently grow leaders in our schools:

- Formal leadership positions
- Curriculum leadership
- Opportunities to lead a strategic school inquiry
- Leading in areas where a staff member has a real passion
- Leading an inquiry team
- Outside on-going courses
- Appraisal process
- Post graduate study
- Dialogue with Principal
- Mentoring Open To Learning conversations to support leaders with conversations with staff around their next steps for learning
- PLD over holiday breaks
- Give staff articles and links to readings

Challenges for Principals in growing leaders:

- Loss of the National Aspiring Principals Programme
- Targeted courses for Middle leaders
- Deputy Principals who also have a teaching component – difficult to give them feedback in a timely manner and for them to have time to reflect
- Difficulty resourcing time for work to be completed or reflection to happen
- Units – great in rewarding leaders who take on particular roles but it seems these days that staff will not take on an extra task without a unit
- Staff would often rather have time to complete a task than the Unit given for the role

In an ideal world, leaders in schools should be supported to grow their leadership expertise by having:

- Time to complete tasks and reflect
- On-going mentoring and coaching in leadership
- Knowing leadership theory and having a common language to use that enables them to describe their practice
- National programmes of leadership for Middle and Senior leaders
- Increased staffing tagged to leadership
- Units being able to be used for salary or release time in schools

In all my reading about growing leaders it has become apparent that it is acknowledged that leadership work is complex in nature but vital due to the increasing demands placed on our profession and a need to lead change innovatively in order that we improve educational and social outcomes for students. In a New Zealand context there are a variety of different models for leadership that I have found particularly useful in considering aspects of leadership growth for Middle Leaders.

The Educational Leadership Model, used in Ministry of Education documents *Kiwi Leadership for Principals (2008)* and *Leading From The Middle (2012)*, clarify the “qualities, skills and knowledge that middle and senior leaders need to lead their schools in the twenty-first century”.

Vivienne Robinson (2011), suggests a model of “student – centered leadership” that includes leadership dimensions and capabilities that are interwoven reminding us that whatever type of leadership we develop in schools, although we wish to grow and develop strong leadership in our schools, that our main focus in this work is to have a positive impact on student success in learning.

This moral imperative to provide equitable outcomes for all students can, I believe, get lost in the rhetoric of leadership language - “collaborative leadership”, “distributed leadership”, “shared learning”, “communities of learning”. When things such as structures and systems, management and organisation, school culture and school finances all seem to be operating wonderfully and all looks good... this can make for a happy school but is it a constantly improving school in relation to student achievement in the richest sense of the word?

Jan Robertson, who has lead New Zealand's work with our National Aspiring Principals Programme (2013) argues that professional learning for leadership in schools must be designed well in order that the professional practice of these leaders, and the teachers they work with, has a positive impact on student learning. She argues that to "manage the complex challenges they will face as they confront and lead these changes, leaders must face transformational professional learning."

Her work with the National Aspiring Principals Programme (NAPP) was based on four key principles:

- Personalised, self-regulated, reflective, metacognitive learning
- Connected and networked leaders sharing and creating knowledge
- Coaching leadership capacity in self and others
- Inquiry-focused leadership and learning, informed by research and evidence

I believe these leadership principles can be built into leadership learning in a school, therefore grounded in a leader's practice and providing opportunities for the leader to also learn with others beyond the school, "learning *within* professional practice is the key to the improvement of that practice and leaders who see their leadership *as* learning, and are adaptive leaders, will be key to the successful leading of system change in New Zealand" (Robertson, 2013)

In 2014, Jan Robinson and Lorna Earl, outlined six leadership dimensions for aspiring leaders – moral purpose, cultural responsiveness, agency and efficacy as change agents, disposition to learn, building the capacity of others and understanding the role of the Principal. They acknowledged how "inextricably inter-related" these are. This confirms for me how complex the role of a school leader is and that in growing school leaders we would want to be able to recognise the different dimensions in action, notice how they are impacting on leadership and provide feedback for our leaders that can grow their leadership further. This means providing feedback on the "how" of leadership, as well as the "what". Leaders can then also reflect upon and learn about their leadership practice, as well as the actions they take as a leader. We want learning for our leaders to be rich and meaningful.

EduCANZ, our professional body is looking at professional learning for school leaders also and in March of this year (2017) a Professional Forum was convened to consider a leadership strategy moving into the future. The synthesis of this forum outlines three major themes of Principled Leadership, Professional Leadership and Future-focussed Leadership with some lofty draft vision statements.

In August this year, EduCANZ discussed the need for an Aotearoa/ New Zealand model of leadership and made some recommendations that included the reinstatement of First-time Principal and Aspiring Principals programmes. It would be wonderful to think that any model of leadership would utilise the models and lessons already learned in the New Zealand context and bring this together to create a coherent, strongly evidence-based leadership design that is nationally owned, resourced and supported by all academics, the Ministry of Education, the profession ... and brings about success for all learners.

In all my reading it has confirmed for me how vital the role of coaching is in the growing of leaders and in their work growing teachers. We have known for a long time how important the conversations are we have with students about their learning are. Opportunities for

adult learners to learn with a coach who skilfully leads a conversation about their practice is necessary for professional growth. Respectful, honest, trusting professional relationships between adults, that allow for challenging conversations can lead to enhanced professional practice. Conversations such as these are a partnership and provide an opportunity for both the leader to learn about their leadership and the coach to learn about coaching and professional practice. If this inquiry into our practice is informed by research and our own evidence in our context then improved practice can lead to further student success in our schools.

Argyris' work (1991) work around double and triple loop learning informs our thinking currently in New Zealand with Open-To-Learning conversations (Robinson, Fevre, El Sinnema, 2016) or Coaching Leadership (Robertson, 2016). In these conversations for learning the first loop involves considering the "how" of professional practice. In the second loop we consider the "why" or the justifications and purposes of that practice. It is here that we discuss our own beliefs, values and assumptions and clarify our thinking. With the third loop we consider the "what might be". It is here that we have discussions about what we might do differently. It is here that we can "explore transformational possibilities for future practice" (Robertson, 2016). Both Robertson and Robinson et al have frameworks for guiding this work.

Moving forward:

Through regular leadership workshops:

- Leaders will develop a deep understanding of who they are – beliefs, values, strengths and challenges
- Develop a common leadership language over time based on leadership theory/research
- Develop a common understanding of what a professional learning disposition means
- Provide opportunities for leaders to have regular coaching in relation to their own leadership
- Leaders will learn coaching skills to support their teachers to grow their practice

Leadership learning model

- Develop a model of leadership learning together based on current models that we believe enables us to reflect rigorously on our leadership growth
- Keep an eye on the model of leadership professional learning that EduCANZ develops to align with/adapt our own
- Review Job Descriptions and appraisal goal setting to align with this model
- Reflect on our practice as leaders in relation to our leadership model
- Provide networks within and beyond our school that support leaders to share their learning as leaders and their possibilities for the future
- Enable the Principal to meet regularly one-on-one to discuss leadership growth based on a collaboratively developed framework
- Align our collaborative leadership learning model with our inquiry model for appraisal which requires research and evidence
- Provide opportunities for leadership learning out of school that align with next steps in leadership growth or support increased qualifications.

Any PLD that happens in our school

- Includes leadership learning
- Utilises coaching to enable change in pedagogy and practice
- Utilises data – academic achievement data, student voice, teacher and leader voice to reflect on/report its success
- Facilitator works alongside Team Leaders/Middle Leaders to grow their capacity to have coaching conversations in the context of the new learning
- Team Leaders and Senior Leaders have time with the facilitator to unpack new learning, discuss learning in their teams and plan for leading next learning steps for their staff
- Team leaders have regular opportunities for time in their team's classrooms beyond appraisal observations to support their teachers in their learning utilising their coaching skills

Implications:

Staffing – middle and senior leaders having time to be in classrooms and to reflect with teachers on their learning means utilising staffing and annual budgets in innovative ways to enable this to be resourced

Collectively bargaining for additional resource to enable leaders to have the time to practice their leadership

PLD design needs to be collaboratively developed with facilitators working in our school

Resourcing further coaching PLD

Actively seeking opportunities for leaders to network beyond our school and to resource this

Opportunities for the Principal to attend conferences, courses and to be mentored to build understanding and skills in growing leadership.

Suzanne Billington
(Principal, Tauriko School)

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