

“How Sustainable is your Career?”

Sabbatical Report by Leyette Callister
Principal, Howick Primary School,
Auckland

Embarking on my plan for a sabbatical, I wondered what was keeping me in my current job and how could I ensure sustainability? Was it the money? Or the joy of seeing children marching with enormous pride into my office to share their great work? Working with great colleagues or the Board of Trustees? Or just my own professional satisfaction in seeing improvements in the financial, student achievement and human resources in the school? I also felt a great deal of concern for a large number of my colleagues - hard working, smart and passionate principals, losing their desire to continue in their roles - worn out, fed up and burnt out. This does not bode well for the future of our children with an aging principalship and fewer senior leaders wishing to take the next step to lead their own schools. The increasing attrition of principals leaving to other careers or retiring early to “escape” means a great loss of intellectual capital and experience to our ranks.

To give some context about my motivation for this topic, I start with my story. My journey has been a challenging one, but seemingly typical of many first time principals. As a beginning principal, despite my excitement at my new position and all the challenges I had accepted at the interview, I found myself at the front of a school with a lot of systems, for a variety of reasons, lacking or absent. To add pressure on this tricky scenario, ERO were due for a visit within a term of my commencement. It was clear that a large amount of work was going to be required of me to have the school meeting their stringent expectations.

Over time, we experienced a great deal of staff turnover, with the exception of 2013 when we had zero turnover and an amazing and settled start to the year in 2014. Re-starting the culture each time a wave of new staff, including senior leaders arrived, to understand and support our philosophies of inclusion, diversity, autonomy, collaboration, etc, was exhausting and incredibly stretching of any leader let alone one without a lot of experience.

There were many times when the pressures associated with trying to be a “good” principal became almost too much to endure. Pressures such as finding new streams on income, managing a huge property portfolio without realistic funding or a consistent contact person in the ministry, taking reasonable and adequate care of the high and special needs students and their families, understanding and meeting the needs and demands of an increasingly diverse teaching staff and being the principal who knew about every student and knew the names of all parents.

So, I am now more than 6 years down the path, and along with my team and some firm and consistent mentoring and advice, we now have increased financial reserves, have a streamlined leadership team who are supported to develop their skills in leading the teams of staff and a lean and effective support staff.

Discussing with colleagues, my challenges were not unique. I know I am a particularly resilient individual, having survived a very difficult upbringing with an alcoholic father but with an incredibly inspiring and strong role model in my mother. I survived sexual abuse myself and then to have the horror befall one of my children in the hands of a colleague. (Most disappointingly the perpetrator was acquitted) I am resourceful with strong creative skills in crafts and cooking and relish the challenge to find solutions to all manner of problems. I do not fall easily and have a lot of optimism that I will be able to solve the relentless issues/problems/challenges that I face daily.

BUT I know that for me, my saving grace is in the time I make to create. My creativity takes the various forms of knitting, sewing garments and art quilting design and patchwork, cooking interesting food and being able to express myself through the lens of my camera or phone. If I can spend time in my studio, designing, cutting, piecing and finishing items, my brain seems to be able to switch off and relax. Why is this so?

In my exploration of this topic, I questioned colleagues about the things they do to alleviate the pressures they face in their workplaces. I also spoke to leaders outside of education to see if the patterns of pressure and resolution of challenges were different or the same. I have also read a wide range of material to see if there is academic backing for my hunch that **“survival, wellbeing and sustainability of the role of principal, is contingent on having a creative outlet that is unrelated in almost every way to work”**

I decided to approach this topic in the following way:

1. Pose the questions -
 - a. What are causes of a lack of principal wellbeing?
 - b. What is the meaning of wellbeing?
 - c. What does sustainability in principalship look like?
 - d. How does creativity support sustainability?
2. Read relevant and easily accessible research and publications
3. Ask my colleagues about their own experiences and opinions, analyse and synthesize their responses
4. Conclude from the above well of information.

What are causes of a lack of principal wellbeing?

The Burnout report (1) showed:

- School leaders score less than the general population on all positive measures and higher on all negative measures of wellbeing”
- The greatest source of stress for all principals ... is the sheer quantity of work, closely followed by a lack of time to focus on teaching and learning
- Sleep deprivation...
- 1.7 times the rate of burnout of the general population..

What is the meaning of wellbeing?

Dr Lucy Hone (2) talked about wellbeing and quoted Martin Seligman in her Stuff article cited below, She talked about PERMA (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishments) and invited readers to take their own “Wellbeing assessment” from this website. The Cambridge dictionary describes wellbeing as “**the state of feeling healthy and happy**”.

What does sustainability in principalship look like? (4)

- Leaders who have a succession plan
- Improve learning for all including teachers
- Leaders who build an educational environment or organisational diversity that promotes cross-fertilisation of good ideas and successful practices in communities of shared learning and development - how can we help each other?
- Spencer study - The first principle of sustainability is to develop something that is itself sustaining.
- To sustain means to nourish.
- Sustainable leadership develops rather than depletes human and material resources
- ...developing the talents of all it's educators
- The emotional health of leaders is a scarce environmental resource.
- ...Even the most motivated and committed leaders can only sustain themselves for so long
- In the end, the only leadership that is sustainable is leadership that can sustain leaders' selves!!
- 'Leaders develop sustainability by how they approach, commit to and protect deep learning in their schools; *by how they sustain themselves and others around them to promote and support that learning; by how they are able and encouraged to sustain themselves in doing so, so that they can persist with their vision and avoid burning out...*

How does creativity support sustainability?

1. “Engaging in a creative activity just once a day can lead to a more positive state of mind. “(2.)
2. A creative activity can be as simple as keeping a doodle journal, knitting, playing a musical instrument, or designing a garden for spring planting-- in other words, activities that almost anyone can do. So express yourself in some way you enjoy on a regular basis, just once a day and benefit from a more positive state of mind. In other words, being creative helps us “feel better” and in turn, it impacts other aspects of our lives.(2)
3. Kaimal et al (2017).(3.) Functional near-infrared spectroscopy assessment of reward perception based on visual self-expression: Coloring, doodling, and free drawing. Doodling in or around the circle design had the highest measured blood flow increase across participants, although the differences between activities was not statistically significant.
4. That it [Art making] is far more than distraction or a mood-regulator. It is a process that integrates the complexities of the creative process to assist and support exploration of what may be uncomfortable or conflictual for the

individual. (Girija Kaimal, Hasan Ayaz, Joanna Herres, Rebekka Dieterich-Hartwell, Bindal Makwana, Donna H. Kaiser, Jennifer A. Nasser (2017) Functional near-infrared spectroscopy assessment of reward perception based on visual self-expression: Coloring, doodling, and free drawing. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 55: 85 DOI: 10.1016/j.aip.2017.05.00)

5. These results surprised Conner, who didn't think the findings would be so definitive. "Research often yields complex, murky, or weak findings," she says. "But these patterns were strong and straightforward: Doing creative things today predicts improvements in well-being tomorrow. Full stop." [Doing Something Creative Can Boost Your Well-Being](#)
6. Conner believes her findings suggest that people should incorporate more creativity into their week—perhaps learn to knit, take up cooking, sing in a group, paint, or play music. She also suggests tapping into creativity at work, by trying to come up with novel solutions to problems or writing creatively.
7. The arts play vital roles in helping us find our authentic voice, and remembering who we are as human beings. I believe when we are in touch with our humanity, we envision better futures, make wiser decisions, and create sustainable enterprises.(5)
8. Creativity begins with a foundation of knowledge, learning a discipline, and mastering a way of thinking. You can learn to be creative by experimenting, exploring, questioning assumptions, using imagination and synthesising information. Learning to be creative is akin to learning a sport. It requires practice to develop the right muscles and a supportive environment in which to flourish. (6)
9. IBM's 2010 **Global CEO Study** stated: *"The effects of rising complexity calls for CEOs and their teams to lead with bold creativity, connect with customers in imaginative ways and design their operations for speed and flexibility to position their organizations for twenty-first century success."*
10. Leo Tolstoy wrote that art is *"indispensable for the life and progress toward wellbeing of individuals and of humanity."* (7)
11. *Being creative will make you feel better – it's scientifically proven.*
12. *Steven J. Tepper's 2014 study of the relationship between artistic practice and subjective wellbeing found that 'artistic practice is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, a more positive self image, less anxiety about change, a more tolerant and open approach to diverse others... Not only is there a relationship between artistic practice and wellbeing, but this relationship is strengthened with increased frequency of participation. All else equal, the more you participate in artistic activity the higher you will score on a variety of wellbeing metrics.'*
13. *Curiosity is good for us and works especially well for reducing anxiety. The more curious you get, the less anxious you become – so get curiously creative! Add to that the fact that higher levels of engagement is directly correlated to higher levels of wellbeing – and flow is the highest level of engagement we can possibly have in an activity. To experience flow you must be participating in a challenging activity, have a clear goal, and be giving it your full concentration.*
14. *Being artistic can make you feel alive and like the best version of yourself. With intentional practice, you can use creative processes to create deeper*

and longer lasting change. As Tepper's study found, regular creative practise has profound impact on happiness, so we need to take inspired action each day towards being creative to reap the results.

Questionnaire put to Principal colleagues:

I surveyed a group of colleagues from my local Principals' Association and on the Principals' Facebook page, asking the following questions:

1. What is your current occupation and estimated hours of work each week.
2. Do you usually do school work (or whatever is relevant to you) on the weekend and if so, approximately how much time do you spend on it?
3. How long have you been in this current position?
4. Do you have a passion/interest/hobby that you enjoy doing in your "spare" time? If yes, please state what this/these activities are.
5. Do you spend adequate time on your outside interests? If so, how do you achieve it? If not, what are the impediments?
6. How long have you done this Activity and how would you describe your skill level at it?
7. How do you justify to yourself spending time on your activity?
8. If your answer to question 4 is No (I don't have a passion/interest/hobby) how do you use spare time?
9. How would you describe your general state of wellbeing?
10. How do you think the time spent on an activity relates to your state of wellbeing?

The results of the survey were not all that surprising but did give me cause to feel concern about my fellow colleagues.

There were 44 respondents to the Principal's questionnaire of whom one was in an Acting role and two were Teaching principals. Of the 44 only 8% reported NOT working at the weekend on school work and of those who did work on the weekends, 30% worked up to 3 hours on schoolwork, 35% on 4-5 hours but a staggering 35% worked over 5 hours, with some saying 8 or 10 hours on school work was the norm. 11.4% of the principals had been in the job less than one year, 29.5 for one to three years, around the same for three to six years and just over 11% had been a principal for more than six years.

When I asked about how principals spent their spare time, there were 16% who didn't have an interest or pastime while the rest ranged from having a therapy dog, organised sport participation, coaching or refereeing, home-type duties such as gardening, housework or family activities, recreational sports like fishing and golf, hiking and walking, reading and crafty options such as having a model railway, design, photography and painting.

I asked if principals thought they spent adequate time on their outside interests to which a staggering 64% said "NO!" due to constant pressure and guilt, tiredness (many agreed with this), always working, needing to be available for school, lack of time, mentally too tired, too many domestic higher priorities, being new in the job meant having to focus on school. Those who did feel they spent adequate time on their outside interests gave the following types of reasons - leaving work I become a mother and partner first, I prioritise what is needed and don't try to do everything, I

ring-fence school pressures to give myself time, I try to give myself time for own activities to increase my energy levels, by getting up early I can do my own things, I plan my own activities into my world.

When asked about justifying time to do their own activities, a quarter of the principals said they can't and don't give themselves time and one stated they have given up trying to make time for themselves. The other three quarters talked about balancing up their work time and non-work focuses, the need for physical and mental well-being, "I know I should", really enjoy the activity and "I have no need to justify it!", it is my "Me" time, "I steal time between chores and work", I am setting an example to staff, I need to be fit and healthy, it helps clear my head.

Those who didn't indicate having a hobby or passion activity said they spent their time working out and reading, doing family chores, housework and schoolwork, watching netflix (several said this) or movies, sitting on the couch on social media or sleeping.

Describing their wellbeing, 34% said they were in an excellent or good state of wellbeing, 45% said they could be better but were mostly ok and the concerning number was 21% who described various states of a lack of wellbeing. They felt constantly tired, stressed, overwhelmed and knew the signs to watch for but felt trapped.

The vast majority of 75% understood the essential connection between time spent on personal choice activities being linked to wellbeing. Comments such as it helps me relax and recharge, helps my mental wellbeing, uplifts and reinvigorates me, I need time out to not be about work, improves health and refreshes my approaches indicated that principals know how their efforts to spend time in passion activities can help. Of concern were those who maybe yearned to spend time of their own; "would be good", "not sure how it linked" - how did they de-stress or creatively refill their emotional "buckets"?

Conclusions:

Being mindful and conscious about creating and making a commitment to creating something everyday is one of the secrets to living a creative and happy life. It is a continual growing process. It could be a reactive strategy like having a 5 minute doodle at your desk or keeping a colouring book in your top drawer to calm down after a challenging meeting, or a proactive strategy where you plan a 3 hour 'make a meal from scratch' cooking session at the weekend. It can be as simple as taking a photo or cooking up a new recipe. Of course, the process of actual art-making – authentic creative expression that has come from your own imagination – is best for reaping the benefits, but there's all sorts of ways to add creativity to your wellbeing toolkit. (7)

There are things you can do to improve your creativity, like daily meditation practice, daily physical exercise, listening to music or walking in nature, so try these if you're

stuck for ideas of what to make. Just remember the most important part is being present and enjoying the process. And if you take the time after to appreciate what you've made, you'll instantly amplify your positive emotions and the positive effect on your wellbeing. The more you enjoy being creative, the bigger and more sustained the impact on your wellbeing will be. (7)

I have grave concerns about the sustainability of many of my colleagues when I look at their understanding about managing their levels of stress and use of down time. That so many don't feel they can justify an end point to their work time and the horrendous hours some are putting in fills me with concern about a lot of broken and sub-par functioning people. Many of the wise comments that have emerged from the questionnaire talk about the need to "ring fence" school and for "time out to NOT be about school".

I remain convinced by my own experience of the value of the creative arts. During my sabbatical time, I was able to consider a design-create-complete sequence for art works which completely absorbed me and filled my creative wells. Because I have a large number of crafts and skills I frequently employ, I always have several projects on the go and during this time I completed large quilts, knitted most of a blanket and some baby clothes, completed quilting on designs I had started in tutored classes some time back, began work on other quilts from design ideas at classes and then spent a long glorious period immersing myself in the beauty and history to be found in the Middle East and Europe. Through this period of immersion, I have gathered an enormous trove of images to use in the production of art works in the future. It has refreshed and enlightened me and I am grateful for an extended period to do it. I think constantly about design and symmetry and my head is filled with the incredibly timeless beauty I have seen around the ancient and modern world. I want to use textiles to re-create and share these amazing images and this is high motivation to balance my school work with my creative arts. I do not shrink away from the enormity of my responsibilities as a principal but feel emboldened to promote a better understanding of the role and its parameters to enable principals of all size schools to know when they can stop and to the extent of their obligations.

It is vital we remove the constant fear of not doing enough by knowing how to prioritise and then to stop. We need to give clear guidance to new principals and there must be a change to the workload for teaching principals so they can balance up their stage of understanding with what is required to run a successful school. And somehow we must make past principals more accountable for leaving a mess for bright eyed, new principals to fall on and attempt to fix immediately, which, based on conversations between many young principals and me, are be a cause for a considerable amount of stress and angst.

To be sustainable, principals need to feel they have a right to allocate time to creative endeavours. Work must be undertaken by the principal support groups - NZEI, NZPF etc to provide a way that principals can balance up the role and responsibilities with the rest of their world so they remain focused, connected and creative role models to their staff. I believe the benefits will be manifold with teachers balancing up their own roles, leading to better focus and a natural flow to better results from their students. A more creative society

References:

1. [Principal Health and Wellbeing Survey](#) – Burnout - Findings from the New Zealand School Leaders' Occupational Health and Wellbeing 2017 Survey. Chief Investigator: Associate Professor Philip Riley.
2. [Dr Lucy Hone, Stuff, June 2017](#)
3. [Creativity and Emotional Well-Being: Recent Research](#) -2016 - Psychology Today - by Cathy Malchiodi PhD, LPCC, LPAT, ATR-BC, REAT
4. [The Seven Principles of Sustainable Leadership](#), 2003, by Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink
5. [What is the connection between creativity and workplace wellness?](#) - by Linda Naiman, Founder of Creativity at Work
6. [What is creativity?](#), Linda Naiman, Creativity at Work
7. [Is creativity the path to wellbeing?](#) - November 2, 2015 - Written by Tara Swart