

Leading a Kahui Ako (Community of Learning)

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An investigation into the professional learning available to support Principals who have been appointed as Kahui Ako Leaders.

Acknowledgements

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Purpose

The NZ education sector is embarking on a new era of collaboration. While some Principals have transitioned their schools to collaborative learning environments, collaborating across multiple school sites is new to the sector. The purpose of this small research project is to establish what effective leadership practice in a Kahui Ako might look like and how leaders of these across-site collaborative environments can be best supported, specifically documenting professional learning that might be offered to leaders of Kahui Ako to assist with the development of skills and attributes required to lead collaboratively.

Background Information

The NZ Ministry of Education (MOE) has strongly encouraged the formation of Kahui Ako (Communities of Learning). The key objective of Kahui Ako has been identified by the MOE as raising achievement for all students across the compulsory educational pathway. This is achieved by sharing expertise and supporting each other (MOE, 2016).

Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom (2004) state that “effective educational leadership makes a difference in improving learning”. Research also suggests that high quality collaboration positively impacts teacher practice and student achievement (Ronfeldt, Farmer, Mc Queen & Grissom, 2015). It is suggested that school leaders need assistance in developing their collaborative leadership practice. If effective leadership and effective collaboration both have a strong influence on learning then it can be assumed that a Kahui Ako Leader’s role is a critical success factor to Kahui Ako meeting their achievement objectives.

A key aspect of the Kahui Ako Lead Principal’s role is to collaboratively lead member principals from primary and secondary schools (and also possibly iwi and ECE contributors) to lift student achievement. As a result, school leaders find themselves grappling with the complexities of collaboration across multiple school environments.

Methodology

Research Questions

Main Question:

How should we provide support for new Kahui Ako leaders to improve collaborative leadership resulting in positive outcomes for students?

- What collaborative leadership experiences do Kahui Ako leaders bring to the role?
- What leadership support/training can they access to assist them in leading their Kahui Ako?
- Which aspects of the support are useful / not useful and why?
- What type of support could be offered to meet their needs?

Collection of Information

Information about support, training and mentoring was gathered from the MOE, NZCER, ERO and the Education Council. This provided some base knowledge about the support currently available for lead principals and what other programmes or support was in development.

Following the collection of this information, participants were interviewed to record their prior experiences of leading collaborative environments and what support, mentoring or training, they are accessing.

Participants were asked to identify needs that they feel they had and comment on the relevance of the support that they are receiving. They were also asked to suggest other programme content or support that could help them in their roles.

Information Analysis

Data from interviews has been divided into three areas: current skills/experiences, current provisions of professional learning and access to them, participants' perceived needs and recommendations for the future.

Information was examined for trends and connections. There were a number of common themes, including barriers to success. I have included them as a relevant aspect of the leadership role.

Findings

While the perspectives of leaders differed slightly, there were common themes that are worth exploring.

Current skills and experience brought to the role

Leaders interviewed for this study all gave their time graciously and generously. All were experienced Principals leading Kahui Ako ranging in size from 2000 to 7000 students. Only one of the Principals interviewed had led a project across schools prior to their appointment as Kahui Ako Lead. This meant that the majority of the Principals leading Kahui Ako experienced the role for the first time once appointed. All Principal's felt that they were involved with other Principals in a collegial way prior to their appointment, with all of them having worked with most members of their group in some fashion, often as a cluster. This meant that Principals had some prior relationship with the people in the group.

The Principal who had led a project before had been part of an Extending Higher Standards Across Schools (EHSAS) project as leader so felt very comfortable with his colleagues in the other 8 schools. He was already very visible in the schools in the cluster and there was a good collaborative relationship already formed.

Leadership Professional Learning - current provisions and access

All Principals interviewed described some level of frustration with the lack of support that they have had to prepare them for and during the role. Professional learning that participants noted included the following:

- National days which included conference type workshops and keynotes. The event was described by one leader as a "great big talk fest". The workshops at these events were run by Kahui Ako's considered successful by the Education Council and/or Ministry of Education (MOE). Leaders described networking with other Kahui Ako Leaders as the main benefit of these sessions. Half of the leaders interviewed described these (and the regional days) as interesting but the result of them being a lot more ideas and things that were needed to be done due to new MOE initiatives.
- Regional days which provide networking and sharing of ideas. These sessions also left leaders stressed at times as new initiatives and ideas were shared.

- Expert partner discussions. Leaders expressed mixed emotions that the Expert Partners skill bases were most suited to working with Across School Teachers. While using them with the teaching staff alleviated their workload to an extent, they have not supported the leader in their development as a change manager or collaborative leader. Most leaders felt that Expert Partners did not necessarily have the expertise or knowledge in the areas they needed to know about.
- Education Council webinars
- Self help. Leaders generally spent significant amounts of time problem solving for themselves.

There was significant frustration voiced about the lack of planned professional learning to support the leader specifically in their role. Specific areas that Principals would have liked support included the following:

- ***Understanding the learning and leadership theory behind the model***

Half of the Lead Principals felt that it would be useful to understand the research behind the collaborative leadership model as this would give them a good understanding of what they are trying to achieve, why it is important and some evidence based data to support the theory.

Others felt that some understanding of collaboration would be useful. For example, to expect storming as a phase before performance improves and collaboration is effective.

- ***Coaching collaborative leadership skills***

Principals felt that leading their own school was quite different to leading across many school with most stating that they felt totally unprepared for the role once they were in it. Despite most of the leaders stating that there was good social capital in the group before their Kahui Ako was formed, moving from congenial to collaborative

relationships takes time. Even the leader who had a lot of experience and good prior collaborative relationships felt that he was always working with one or two others in the team all the time as tricky issues arose.

A coach or a mentor to work alongside leaders as they learn to work more collaboratively would assist leaders as they form effective relationships in their groups. The coach would be able to guide the leader through the complexity of mediating relationship problems.

All Principals' felt that there was no formal support in the leadership sphere. As a result, all Principals felt that leadership learning, specifically targeting leading across schools was an area that would be helpful to develop.

Systems development

Leaders believe that generally, systems are created as they are required and that there is very little preparation in advance for the tasks that they are required to manage or lead. Some of the more frustrating aspects of the lack of system development and training have a serious impact on the effectiveness of the leaders' job. Some of these areas are considered significant with legal and financial implications. For example, in finances, there have been some changes to the system around budget time frames (accounting year versus school year). Leaders were not informed of these changes and the implications are significant. Another example is in the Human Resource component of the job. As leaders finish their contracts, there appears to be no guidelines to support the process to reappoint. Leaders feel that they are constantly chasing someone to find out how they should approach simple management structures. This is time consuming and is the same for everyone so a system solution would be useful.

Administration systems and support were also identified as an area needing extra support. Leaders expressed frustration that they were completing simple tasks that were time consuming. This included timetabling of meetings and minute taking, completion of documentation and budgeting. One Principal described his role as

having two Senior Leadership roles in one and felt he needed a PA to manage all the meetings as he has so many more people to deal with.

Just-in-time learning

Lead Principals described feeling tired of the catchphrase that they were “building the plane while flying it”. While they agreed that they were, they felt that having been in the role for three years it would be useful to have developed some of the work already. Leaders felt that it would be helpful if the MOE supported them by being preempting knowledge or skills that they would require before they needed it, allowing them to tap into information as required. For example, knowing that a number of Kahui Ako were due to readvertise for a new leader, it would be useful to know what to expect and what was required to be done, rather than having to work this out for themselves. This could easily be achieved by calling all COL in this timeframe to meet to discuss requirements and expectations.

One of the observations made by leaders was that while there was more support being developed, it was not differentiated and Kahui Ako just starting out and those who were early adopters were all getting the same information. This was not useful.

One leader summed it up by saying “our bucket is just not being filled.”

Barriers to success

All Kahui Ako Leaders expressed frustration with the lack of development of the system that their roles are entwined with. They include the lack of support and professional learning for them but also many other areas. While this was not originally part of my study, I have decided to include these frustrations in the hope that some changes might be able to be made which will allow the leaders to be more successful in their role in future.

1. Collective Agreements

Every leader interviewed was frustrated with the rigidity of both of the Collective Agreements (NZEI and PPTA), even describing it as a “millstone”. They were clear

in their understanding that the Collective Agreements clauses were originally designed to cater for career pathways however in this was impeding the progress of their targets. Leaders felt that most often the people that would be most successful in roles working both within and across schools were their senior leaders (Deputy and Assistant Principals) who were experienced in instructional leadership and expert curriculum leaders. As senior leaders were excluded from the process (unless there was an in-school work around), appointed classroom teachers were asked to deliver across school content without the expertise required. One leader described this as like “having eight brand new Deputy Principals that you have to manage”. Leaders felt that they were not getting the best people filling these positions and the backfill teaching staff were weakening their school curriculum further. The solutions offered included removing the requirement for the teaching component, seconding to the role and/or allowing Deputy Principals to be in the role. There was also some concern that Across School Teachers were earning more units than Deputy Principals with much less expertise and experience. This was described as an urgent matter to find a solution to. Some leaders had tried to apply for variations to the role of which none were successful.

The consequence of these challenges is that part of their leadership role is now developing leaders to work effectively in their roles across schools. This is a significant problem considering the 0.4 allocation of time that the leaders receives.

2. Time

Kahui Ako Leaders describe the time allocation of 0.4 per week as not enough, especially during the initial set-up phase. One pointed out that if an equity model was to be established, it would be fairer as currently all COL's get the same allocation regardless of size.

Leaders approached the allocation differently with some choosing to spend it in their own school using it as a base and coordinating from there, others choosing to be out in all the schools in the Kahui Ako on a regular basis. One Principal had delegated

whole portfolios to other senior leaders (for example, Health and Safety) and others had released their Deputy Principal's to do the Principal's job for two days per week.

All agreed that the job can not be pigeon-holed into two days per week with all needing to spread tasks across the week where they are most relevant. Most leaders spent at least 0.6 on the role, with one spending 0.8, despite being beyond the setup phase.

More than half of the Principal's were struggling with the administration requirements as their schools were smaller and they didn't have the administration capacity in their own schools that could absorb all the work. A larger part of the group felt that an administration person specifically allocated to this role would be beneficial as using their own staff was not useful if they hadn't been involved in the meetings. For example if a letter needed to be written, or a document produced, unless the administration person was in the meeting, then it was too difficult to explain what they were required to do. It was easier to do the extra work themselves. One leader described their Board of Trustees having to financially support the appointment of more administration staff to cater for some of the tasks that she was doing originally, (for example, Novopay.) This leader was grateful that her BOT support her to ensure that she would prioritise her time more effectively.

Another area taking up significant time with successful Kahui Ako was the constant requests to help other Kahui Ako. While the leaders are willing to support other Principals in their learning journey, and these requests were initially always accepted, leaders have struggled with the time it takes to fulfil these requests while they are battling with their own workload, and as a consequence the yes responses have reduced.

Requests also came from the Ministry of Education to host workshops at National Events or to respond to various staff with new initiatives. One leader described being contacted every day in July by someone different in the MOE to discuss bundled services, special needs, ECE or other projects. It appeared that there were

people in the MOE being appointed for special projects specific to Kahui Ako that needed to be rolled out. There was simply no time to be involved in these projects.

3. Collaboration

The other main barrier described by leaders was collaboration itself. Most described the challenge of leading collaboratively as very difficult. One described trying to “work with high functioning individuals who have been in a Tomorrow’s School setting” as demanding. Silos had been operational for some time and the view was “what’s in it for me and my school?” Another used an example about the “within school roles” being just for a member’s school and that they wouldn’t allow them to be used for the collaborative goals. The difficulty with these perspectives is that member schools have no accountability to the leader for what they are actually doing in their school. One leaders’ strategy was to move with the willing and create such a compelling story that others want to be part of it.

It was also acknowledged by most leaders that it was difficult to navigate the complexities of collaboration as all other Principals in the Kahui Ako are busy and typically focussed on their own schools.

4. Timely communication

Leaders felt that communication regarding expectations were not delivered in time for thoughtful action. One leader expressed exasperation about messages coming from NZSTA at their conference that were not aligned with information that they had been given as a leader. Another had information that the MOE support staff did not. A consistent timely approach to communication is imperative to success.

Reflections of the Kahui Leadership Role

Most of the Principals in the Kahui Ako lead role felt that the role had provided them with challenge and the opportunity to develop their skills. While they generally felt that they had had to problem solve with little support, they acknowledged that the

leadership role had been good for their leadership practice. Most enjoyed the networking aspect including the opportunity to share problems and solutions.

However, only one leader felt that they could continue beyond their current appointment with the drain on them both personally and professionally being too much. Leaders also expressed concern about the lack of focus in their own schools. One leader who bases themselves in her own school described being in her school but absent. She feels unable to get to the staffroom and talk with teachers as she is constantly in meetings.

Leaders described the lack of systemic practice and support made the role too challenging while trying to lead their own school.

Recommendations

All leaders were asked how they would improve the experience for others in the future. I have divided the recommendations into leadership and learning and management and systems. Recommendations were the following:

Leadership and learning

1. Create Kahui Ako leader positions that are secondments for at least 2 years or provide fixed term or permanent contracts so that leaders only have to focus on their leadership role with the Kahui Ako, rather than splitting their time between their own school and the group of schools. A well researched programme of leadership development specifically aimed at the leader of a Kahui Ako. This might be a programme with a sector developed leadership matrix (for example, see the Ontario Leadership Matrix).
2. Provision of a coach/mentor for each Kahui Ako leader. This coach must have skills in coaching and collaborative leadership and should have experience in doing so. Their skill base should also include change management. Leaders did not see the current expert partners fulfilling this role.

3. A programme of learning for leaders that is differentiated to the stage of development that their Kahui Ako is at.
4. A digital portal for just-in-time type learning.
5. Access to people with expertise in specific areas that are relevant. One point person is not always best.

Management and systems

1. Review the time allocation given to leaders. This could mean increasing the time allocation for Kahui Ako leaders during start up, providing a more equitable allocation for larger Kahui Ako and or a general increase to 0.6.
2. Remove the barriers in the collective agreements, including teaching component and unit holders. Ensure that Senior Leaders have the opportunity to be part of the learning landscape in a Kahui Ako.
3. Bulk fund the resourcing and funding allocation including the release component.
4. Funding for administrative support needs to be increased. Leaders shouldn't have to be booking rooms and organising lunches.
5. Multiple across school roles could be held by one person freeing up the need to have a classroom responsibility.
6. Ensure that all messages going out are consistent. What is promoted at one educational event is the same at others.

Conclusion

This project has enabled me to explain the perception some Kahui Ako leaders have of the support and learning programmes provided for them in the New Zealand context. It has also established the perceived barriers to success and the recommendations made by leaders to further improve the system.