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Clarifying Leadership:

The Role of the Primary School Principal as an Educational Leader

By Laurie Thew

Primary school principals face the difficult task of combining their role as school managers with their role as educational leaders. The managerial role is well defined but what exactly does “educational leadership” mean and how is it exercised in New Zealand Schools? Laurie Thew’s research attempts to define the concept of leadership by examining the day to day practice of principals in their schools and isolating the factors that determine effective leadership. This paper also considers the implications for the practice of leadership and offers recommendations for developing it.

Introduction

“The word ‘leadership’, with its attendant heroic and charismatic images, is probably one of the most written about, contested and least understood in the English language.”

(Smyth in Watkins 1986: iii)

Educational leadership is important for success in achieving personal as well as national goals for education. However, a study of the literature soon exposes leadership as a poorly defined concept. Furthermore, there is an almost overwhelming emphasis on a managerial approach to school administration. This approach does not adequately acknowledge the day-to-day reality of school life. Schools are places where expectations are influenced by personalities and humanistic concerns. Principals need to be able to balance a demand for managerial efficiency with educative and democratic leadership. This makes it an extremely difficult educational environment for principals to operate in as effective leaders.

This study focused on three primary school principals and investigated their actions, and decision-making processes as they went about their work as school leaders. The participants were successful, non-teaching principals of large urban primary schools. An important question, used to probe beyond the routine, asked these principals to consider how they decided a course of action when they were confronted with seemingly



Laurie Thew

Principals are too caught up with the day-to-day management of schools to give much thought to educational leadership, says Laurie Thew. Laurie knows from first-hand experience the fragmentation and difficulties principals face. He has been a principal for over 20 years first at Maraetai School and later at Manurewa Central School in Auckland which has a staff of 24 and a roll of 560. Leadership is a critical component of the principal's role, but it is hard to define exactly what it is." [The concept of] leadership is really overused and under-theorised," says Laurie. "Everyone has got an opinion of what it might be, but no one can say what it actually is, in spite of all the words written about it." Having completed a master's thesis on the role of principals, Laurie chose as his doctoral thesis the role of the primary school principal as an educational leader. But first he had to define what was meant by leadership. "I wanted to come up with a definition of leadership that would hold true across leaders in general, not just principals in schools.

irreconcilable dilemmas. The data, produced from approximately twelve hours of recorded interviews was supplemented with the use of a comprehensive questionnaire given to a randomly selected sample of eighteen principals.

Study outcomes

The principals involved in this research saw leadership as having a vision, having it adopted by others and persuading people to working together to realise that vision. The majority of principals surveyed described leadership as involving people and management as involving "things" and processes.

However this explanation of leadership does have limitations. A good deal of "people work" the principals described may not be leadership at all but rather personnel management.

It is also possible that there is a separation (and some confusion) in principals' minds between what it means to establish an educational vision and the creation of school image. The Tomorrow's Schools reform process emphasised managerial requirements and de-professionalised school leaders, forcing principals to respond to this new environment. A predictable response to this competitive situation was to shift the focus from educational vision to school image. However while the principals in this research were conscious of public perception and the need for their school to be seen as "successful" they attempted to retain a professional rather than a competitive view of their responsibilities.

This study also found that the three key principals' understandings of school leadership included an appreciation of social justice and that being a leader involved establishing a personal vision that was justifiable on moral and ethical as well as political imperatives. Their leadership seemed to depend very much on personal relationships and team building.

The principals used personal relationships to promote their own leadership vision as a "group vision" and have others act in support of it. This did not mean the vision was necessarily imposed but it was understood and accepted by all that the principal as leader

One definition of leadership given by principals is having a vision for the school, conveying that vision to your staff and getting them to work towards it. But vision, says Laurie, should not be confused with school image. Since Tomorrow's Schools reforms and increasing competition between schools, principals have been very conscious of the need to project a "successful" school image. School image and educational vision are not synonymous.

One way principals show leadership is by persuading people to accept a policy or point of view but "the other thing they did and that was far more important and far more subtle was that they constantly talked about a vision for the school...They interpreted all sorts of little happenings and events for people and got them to understand those things in a certain way," says Laurie. Principals act as leaders when they transcend what might be considered good management and come up with solutions which are most appropriate in a local context.

However, says Laurie, what professional development exists for principals tends to focus almost exclusively on management and there is little thought given to or reflection on the principal as educational leader.

had the right to determine outcomes and how those outcomes could be best achieved.

Principals, in the study had difficulty isolating management from leadership. A likely reason for this is that leadership is not adequately covered in professional development programmes, nor do principals undertake philosophical consideration, or self-reflection, as to what leadership might be or how it should be exercised. Principals also felt that leadership is not recognised as important by central Government.

Developing personal theories

"You have to have a really clear understanding of your beliefs and philosophy before you can pass that on to somebody else."

(Julie)

How principals arrive at educational decisions in the context of conflicting expectations was an important consideration behind this research.

Principals' personal theories about how the world operates and how one should behave in that context appeared to be based on their own life experiences from childhood onwards. This was clearly illustrated by the principal who had a clear concept of leadership as service to others. However when questioned as to how this idea developed she was unsure.

"I suppose it's an amalgam of things. You watch from even when you are a child what people do, whether it's your parents in your own family who are in a sense leaders in the family, whether it's extended family and people who have leadership roles and then you move into school and community and into adult life and there's always people who you know are in leadership roles so you are sifting out ideas of what it takes to make a more effective leader"

(Mary)

Life experiences appeared to be the source of principals' belief systems that were the

touchstones for decision-making and ultimately determined how the principal operated.

“All the time that [belief system] is being shaped by what happens to you either internally in the institution of the school, or externally with your own life and beliefs”
(Peter)

Belief systems appeared to evolve through personal and career experience, personal networking and through personal reflection. These beliefs both forced and enabled principals to reconcile what they believed should be done with what needed to be done in any given situation. When there was a mismatch between individual belief and institutional expectation a pragmatic solution was usually found which retained individual integrity.

“I am not sure where a gut feeling comes from. It’s not something you come to quickly. Personally I don’t come to a gut feeling quickly – it takes time so it’s probably a whole lot of things.”
(Mary)

Learning to act in the midst of uncertainty

How principals decide what to do when they don’t know what to do is an important question. What happens when they are faced with a difficult situation that lies outside their experience or poses a challenge to their personal beliefs?

At the simplest level principals could respond by reverting to role. That is they could act as a principal is expected to act while “on duty” in that position. The principals in this study, however, had relatively clear problem-solving strategies for operating in such instances. An initial step was to gather relevant information and canvass a number of possible options.

A second step was to take advice from personal and professional networks. This allowed the problem, the information and the possible outcomes to be presented to others for their consideration. This ensured a wider range of input into both understanding the problem and potential solutions.

A third step was for principals to apply their personal views to possible outcomes. Principals attempted to put themselves in the “shoes of those affected” and to see things, at least temporarily, from their point of view. Principals then took appropriate action finding a balance between outside expectation and their own personal beliefs. This third step was summed up thus:

“I have found that often, in a really difficult situation, after I have been through all the process and I have weighed up the pros and cons I often get a really, what I would describe as ‘a gut feeling’ about what is the right path to take.”
(Mary)

Leadership, power and control

Principals can exercise power because of their position in the school hierarchy. It is this authority inherited on appointment which enables principals to define and police operating boundaries in schools.

On the other hand, control is established and exercised by individuals through their interaction with other people. Principals in this study provided examples of exercising formal control in two ways. Firstly, they created change through the development of school

policy and the acceptance of legally mandated requirements. Secondly, they acted as influences on their staff and on the community. The study examined the way principals selectively combined language content, presentation style and role expectation to create specific understandings in the minds of others. This emerged as an important aspect of principals' leadership.

“Whether or not followers become committed to leaders depends in no small measure on leaders capacity to give meaning to relationships and events. They do this by putting them in context and revealing their purpose and direction, and by articulating values in a manner that engages and captures the imaginations of the followers.”

(Slater 1995: 465)

Thus power arises through the principal's position while control depends on the principal's capacity to persuade and inspire others through his or her personality and style. This helps explain why it is possible for some principals to have power but to seem to lack control. It also clarifies why people that are not in positions of power may exercise influence and have control beyond the status of their position.

Leadership defined

“In many ways management sometimes hinders people from perhaps exploring the possibilities of leadership because it's like being caught up with the day-to-day...they know it's actually often the nuts and bolts stuff that's stopping them from having time to reflect and explore on the wider dimensions of leadership.”

(Mary)

If one is to define leadership then it is necessary to attempt to separate it from the concept of management – difficult as the task may be.

Management emerged from this study as a process of logical action within accepted legislation, regulations, guidelines and policies. This form of action is based on a prescribed rational way of viewing the world.

Clearly leadership is something more than management. This study suggests that leadership is the exercise of control to bring about a change in the “taken for granted” rational view of the world.

Principals in this study experienced situations when rational expectations clashed with their personal worldview of what was appropriate. Principals were seen to be exercising leadership when they came up with a solution that fitted the circumstances rather than one based on convention. Consequently leadership can be described as the process of defining the rules of appropriateness as to what is acceptable or what is desirable.

“[Leadership is] is having a vision for the school and conveying that vision to your staff and bringing them on board to work towards that vision.”

(Peter)

Implications for practice

The aims of this study were to bring a school perspective to the study of educational leadership and to contribute to improved leadership in schools.

Given the findings of this study the major implication for practice appears to revolve

around principals' professional development. In New Zealand pre-service and in-service professional development for principals is limited in availability and content.

Eight of the eighteen principals surveyed considered they were not well prepared or totally unprepared for principalship prior to appointment. Only three questionnaire respondents considered they were well, or very well, prepared. These figures are cause for concern and indicate the need for a pre-appointment principalship qualification programme.

The development of principals once appointed is also necessary. Results from this study show that in-service development was haphazard and dependent on the interest of individual principals and their employing Boards of Trustees. There is no nationally co-ordinated programme of principal development that is on-going, supported by incentives and comprehensive in content.

At present, the New Zealand Ministry of Education is working with interest groups to develop a national programme to assist the professional development of newly appointed principals. The programme will involve 50 principals in 2002 although this number is expected to rise to 520 by 2005. This initiative needs to be expanded with some urgency to include all principals.

One outcome of the Tomorrow's Schools reforms has been the increased isolation of principals. The principals in this study did not appear to act collectively to any large degree. Networks were important and these appeared to operate one to one, in small mentoring groups or larger associations. While networking was significant for information sharing and morale support, an on-going professional development programme would provide much needed support and cohesiveness to what is currently somewhat fragmented school leadership.

Towards a national programme of school leadership

Formal training for school leadership may be rare in New Zealand but programmes have been long established in the United States and have attracted much attention in England since the 1960s and 1970s. English programmes illustrate a number of pitfalls to be avoided. School leadership programmes need to develop in partnership between state regulatory authorities, higher educational institutions and schools. This should develop a pathway for professional development that avoids issues that have bedevilled programmes in England including the difficulty of distinguishing between leadership and management, the emphasis on business practice and the lack of cohesion between a centrally controlled qualification and specialist university degrees. Rather than be sources of conflict such topics should be the catalyst for leadership debate among principals themselves.

This study has clarified potential course content from a New Zealand perspective. Leadership is not clearly defined among principals, management demands an increasing share of time and principals seem to have less time to reflect on day-to-day issues let alone ponder what leadership might be. These issues need to be addressed. Principals engaged in this study recognised the importance of educational leadership.

"I had to make decisions[on becoming a principal] that they[the staff] would not understand and would not agree with and maybe not even understand why a decision had to be made. So with my staff I was friendly but again there had to be a professional distance."

(Peter)

Principals involved in this research gave an insight into a job that has personally become increasingly isolating and at times lonely. They expressed concern at their lack of involvement in national issues, the dearth of genuine consultation with authorities and the complex interface between state and school that seemed to culminate at their door. While these principals had clear views about they believed leadership may be, it appeared management issues dominated school life and limited both an understanding of what leadership is, or might be, and the time to exercise it.

Recommendations regarding principals leadership development in New Zealand

- A national pre-service principalship qualification should be established. This would ensure principal succession training on a national basis, give guidance to Boards of Trustees' appointments and potentially improve principals' initial performance.
- The specific training programme currently being developed for newly appointed, first time principals should be expanded and be mandatory for all first time appointments.
- An on-going professional development programme should be undertaken by all currently serving principals. National guidelines should be established for this. Flexibility of approach is needed to target specific principals' needs and these goals should be recorded in annual performance agreements.
- Professional development programme content should distinguish between management training and leadership development. While both are important the latter requires a strong philosophical approach that recognises and develops individual principals' understandings and needs.
- The structure and content of leadership development programmes should be determined following consultation among national policy makers, academics and practitioners. National guidelines should be provided to give direction to principals and employing bodies.
- The leadership component of development programmes should recognise and develop each principal's philosophical understanding of leadership rather than promote a form of best practice. Such programmes should be philosophically rather than competency based.
- Principals' professional development programmes should be supported with funding, a recommended time allocation and salary incentives. Professional development incentives for principals currently appear to be piecemeal and in the case of principals' remuneration woefully inadequate.

Implications for further research

This study has emphasised the importance of personal identity and individual life experience in leadership behaviour. There appears to be a complex interplay between context and personal identity that determines leadership behaviour. However, just what identity is, and to what extent individual identity moderates the influences of context remains unclear. Research is required to further determine the implications for leadership in this regard.

This study has responded to a need for educational leadership research to be grounded

in actual practice. It has clarified the school leadership of three principals who all exhibited strong belief systems and the determination to follow their educational vision on behalf of other people. However leadership style has not been examined except in passing and many questions remain. Should leaders be ideally democratic, moral and individually empowering? Should leaders be autocratic, entrepreneurial and culturally directive? Is there a middle path and who should decide a path anyway? More school based, grounded theory research would be valuable to help determine what particular style of educational leadership is desirable and/or effective.

On a practical note this study has exposed the limitations of principalship preparation and development in New Zealand, which raises the consequential difficulty of principal appointment. The issue of principal selection is relevant given the importance of the position and the lack of information available to Boards of Trustees whenever they undertake principal selections. Leadership may be a complex and under theorised concept but it is a crucial aspect of being a principal. Research is urgently required to establish factors that link predictors of educational leadership achievement with actual success in an occupation in which the price of failure is too costly to contemplate.

Conclusion

While the three key principals involved in this study were a small group they did represent an experienced core of urban New Zealand primary principals. Their evidence, supported as it was by a larger group of colleagues, provided an interesting insight into the intricacies of leadership development in both a general and school specific context

Educational leadership, in the guise of “deciding what to do tomorrow” has been summarized as a reciprocal interaction of individual personality and context. Suggestions have been made as to how this relationship develops and what this means for educational leadership in particular and leadership in general. However it is important to conclude with the comment that, regardless of the intricacies outlined, the principals involved were intent on being committed and effective leaders and, by their own admission, in an imperfect world, principalship in New Zealand can often be as rewarding as it is difficult.

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