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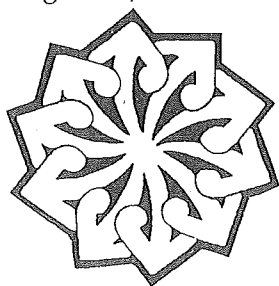
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The School Principal as the Head Learner

Susan Lovett

School Leadership in New Zealand is within the context of decentralisation. It is argued that school leaders need to be proactive in their own learning to ensure the ongoing development of effective and dynamic schools. Given the pressures facing today's school leaders, this is a real and urgent challenge. Not all principals share this view. Providers of professional development for school leaders must convince busy principals that more learning will make their jobs more rewarding.

There is a mismatch on the one hand between the leadership literature promoting collegiality and a community of learners and on the other hand the climate of accountability where leaders are inevitably distanced from their staff and students through administrative duties and performance management roles. To retain their credibility, school leaders must promote the image of principals as head learners in their schools.

A range of current professional development opportunities serve the needs of principals and those aspiring to the principalship. Future developments such as Principals' Centres are a means to enable principals to become active and ongoing learners at the forefront of their learning communities.

School Leadership within the New Zealand Context

Research about school principals and the nature of their work is not a new topic for study. For at least twenty years researchers have been investigating the principalship in New Zealand. Coleman (1976), Edwards (1979), Payne (1984), Ernst and Whinney (1987) and Thew (1989). These studies have involved ethnographic and survey research to highlight both the complexity of the role and its many pressure points. Now it is rather disheartening to return to the earlier studies and note that the present reality of the principalship is no better, in fact it may even be worse for some principals.

As far back as 1976, Coleman surveyed thirty-nine schools with non-teaching principals in the Wellington area. Like today's principals, these principals were concerned about the interruptions and administrative trivia preventing them from spending more time in classrooms. Coleman recommended more administrative support for principals to enable more concentration on educational matters, and hopefully, more efficiency and effectiveness in their leadership roles. Wylie (1997) maintains that this demarcation continues into current principals' perceptions of their work, and reports frustration that administrative demands keep principals from putting most of their energy into what they perceive to be the core of their work: education.

It is significant that New Zealand principals have more responsibilities than principals in any other country in the world. In 1989, principals with their Boards of Trustees became responsible for staff appointments and the management of finances and property. These were new roles which had previously been held, in primary schools, by district Education Boards. Since the introduction of the "Tomorrow's Schools" reforms, it has been necessary to monitor the workloads and professional support for principals. Wylie has tracked the effects of the reforms on principals since the reforms' inception in 1989. There are clear signs in her latest research (1997) that continued and intensive workloads are taking their toll on principals' energies, and may be making the principalship less attractive to teachers. One result is that many principals are giving less time to their professional development. In such pressured times, there is an urgent need to look after school principals, and ensure that they are supported in their work. It may no longer be sufficient merely to offer various programmes of support, as presently available throughout the country, but to move a step further and find ways of ensuring that all principals see the need for such professional development and make use of the available opportunities.

It seems from these comments and my observations as a provider of professional development programmes that many principals need help to understand their roles, analyse current practice, and find alternative ways of making their jobs more rewarding and satisfying for both themselves and those with whom they work. This is not to say that providers should be telling principals what to do. Rather, providers can serve a useful function if they enable principals to network with others in similar situations, create opportunities for reading, and above all encourage principals to see themselves as ongoing learners who are open to alternative and perhaps new ways of working. In my view, it is no longer sufficient to accept that our principals are appointed on the basis of being strong classroom teachers. The principalship role requires a special set of skills for which preparation and sustained learning can make a difference.

Ideally, professional development should be seen as a career long activity. Huberman (1993) has analysed the lives and careers of teachers to show that there are a number of career stages. While these concentrated on teachers and not principals, I believe there are useful parallels. The first is one of career entry, and is characterised by survival and discovery. In the case of the newly appointed principal, life is often one of reacting to the unknown. This stage is followed by stabilisation, and is marked by professional commitment, pedagogical mastery and increased confidence. Principals, like teachers, would be feeling more relaxed in their roles at this point, having overcome some of the time and stress management issues. A third stage is one of experimentation and diversification followed by reassessment. This stage could well coincide with the mid-career crisis. The next stage is described as one of serenity and rational distance, being self confident and less willing to improve or change. The final wind-down stage is labelled disengagement. At this point the teacher/principal would systematically and positively disengage from professional commitments.

In terms of professional development provision, it is important to consider that principals will cover all of these stages. Duncan (1996) reminds us that the change towards decentralisation in New Zealand, while intensifying teachers'/principals' work has also expected all teachers/principals to be equally motivated. Huberman's (1993) work shows that teachers/principals will respond depending on where they are in relationship to their career status and past experience. This is where our professional development programmes for principals may be falling short, assuming that principals all need the same information at a particular time.

The Official View of the Primary Principal's Role After "Tomorrow's Schools"

In 1989, Ballard and Duncan sought to clarify the role of the principal as a result of the Tomorrow's Schools reforms. The school principal was seen as the professional leader who performed three functions. These were described as:

- 1 The executive function contributing to and implementing the policy of the Board of Trustees in order to meet the objectives to the charter.
- 2 An instructional function leading the staff in the implementation of the school's programmes.
- 3 A reporting function showing the achievements of the school and its programmes.

These have proved to be three challenging functions for principals regardless of their teaching or non-teaching status. As the lynch pin between the staff and Board of Trustees, principals have faced new challenges. For some principals, especially those in lower socio-economic areas, this has involved an additional load, training Board of Trustee members to do their own assigned work or even to do the work for them in order to comply with the legislation and avoid detrimental media coverage. It is fortunate that the passage of time has meant that more guidelines have become available stipulating the roles and responsibilities of those involved. Inservice courses have addressed some of these needs as problems have arisen. However, these have tended to be stopgaps rather than any sustained attempt at principal development.

Political Climate

The current political climate is not helping principals as learners. In times of change, people require support rather than judgement. Change requires adaptation, and this often involves experimentation and risk taking as new solutions are found. It is, therefore, no surprise that teachers are currently angry with the Education Review Office's claim that there are too many incompetent teachers in their midst. Rather than criticism, teachers would appreciate some positive support as a recognition that teaching is a demanding and stressful occupation and that teachers are working hard at change.

Hughes (1991) writing in a similar vein maintains:

"What research tells us about good professional development does not fit with the style of Australia's current political culture characterised by corporate management, accountability rhetoric and plenty of steering from the top ... the structures we have do not make effective professional development possible."

Learning for Principals

It has already been acknowledged that it is difficult for the leader to be a learner. Barth (1985) believes that being a learner is an essential characteristic of a school leader. In saying this, Barth reminds us that many of the characteristics – the skills we recognise, and which research suggests are important for effective principals – are learned skills. It is, therefore, inexcusable for principals to avoid learning opportunities. If they are trying to encourage their staff to undertake professional development, then this should also be modelled by principals. This role modelling is vital.

In 1985, Bennis and Nanus similarly identified a number of common characteristics in their interviews with highly effective leaders. Above all they talked about learning. They stressed that leaders who do not learn do not long survive as leaders. We would, therefore, do well to remember Schon's (1987) advice:

"The advice for principals, in a nutshell, is to get into the habit of and situations for constant learning. Skill and know-how are as important as attitude. This means access to new ideas and situations, active experimentation of analogous and dissimilar coaching in relation to practice and more."

Our difficulty here is not that all principals share this mindset for continuous learning. As long as the morale is low in the teaching profession this will be difficult to overcome.

We continue to be surrounded by reminders that on-the-job learning can be painful and difficult to achieve. Peterson (1985) provides six factors as hindrances to on-the-job learning. These are:

- 1 Brevity, variety, and fragmentation of daily tasks make it difficult to see patterns and make sense of them.
- 2 Principals' preference for action in solving problems works against reflective selfassessment and learning.

- 3 Infrequent formal opportunities to share experiences with colleagues inhibit peer learning, and prevent principals from capitalising on a storehouse of experience.
- 4 Professional growth and measurement of progress are hindered by feedback from superiors that is non-specific and abstract.
- 5 Increasingly diverse demands from others lead principals to take a reactive, rather than proactive, stance and stress short term results over long term learning.
- 6 Contextual characteristics of school districts do not motivate principals to take professional risks and try new ideas.

Many principals perceive that those hindrances are intensified in the self managing school where they juggle multiple accountabilities to the Board of Trustees, Ministry of Education, Education Review Office, as well as their prime responsibility to students and parents. Professional development programmes for principals need to take these factors into account, and where possible seek to remove the hindrances by suggesting alternative ways of addressing the use of work time, delegation, and collaborative practice.

Further impediments to principals as learners are suggested by Barth (1985). The first of these is the demands on time. A principal writes:

"More is expected of me with less. If I stay to participate in a teacher's maths workshop, the schedules for next semester and the parent phone messages will go unattended. Of course, saying, 'I don't have time' is another way of saying other things are more important, and perhaps more comfortable for us. Time is precious and demands are many. The leader's learning takes a back seat."

A second impediment is the principal's experience as a learner. Barth maintains that few principals come to learning activities without baggage from prior activities. He also argues that few retain much confidence that learning opportunities will be interesting and helpful in running a school.

A third impediment is the view that for a principal to be a learner is sacrilegious. Many principals find it difficult to justify spending school money on learning opportunities for themselves. Along with this reluctance to engage in learning can be a reluctance to publicly acknowledge that principals are deficient in some way. Some principals appear to find it difficult to admit that they do not know everything.

The final impediment is that if principals engage in a learning experience, and if they learn something – a new way of thinking about curriculum, a new interpersonal skill, a new idea about improving school climate – then they have to do something with the fruit of the learning. The reward for learning is additional work. There is a paradox here that professional development is both energy and time depleting and energy and time replenishing.

This paradox is also highlighted in one of Wylie's interviews with a principal in a 1997 study who said:

"I can't sustain this vitality for another seventeen years. The rate of change is much faster, I have to keep reading, studying, the children deserve high quality – but I'm at the stage when I don't want to spend every weekend in study. There's no career structure now. No early retirement schemes. I have a friend, in his late fifties, he's past it, the school's falling apart, but he has nowhere to go."

For the long term good of education in New Zealand situations such as this must be remedied. Principals have professional development needs throughout their careers. Opportunities must be provided for them to take part, and professional development providers would do well to realise this fact.

Current Professional Development Provisions for Principals

Throughout New Zealand, the colleges of education and some universities and polytechnics are providing qualification courses for principals and those aspiring to the principalship. These programmes are post graduate diplomas in educational management or leadership with Masters level courses being offered by Massey University College of Education and the School of Education at Waikato. The market is competitive and numbers of enrolments continue to grow each year. Some of these provisions rely on face to face delivery (eg Dunedin and Wellington Colleges of Education and the School of Education at Waikato University). Others use a distance education mode with some block vacation course teaching (eg Christchurch and Massey University Colleges of Education and Unitec). All of these programmes are well received by the principals who enrol.

Aside from qualification courses, there is also a range of regular seminar options available to principals. These include inservice courses largely coordinated by the School Support Services, "sandwich seminars" on issues of significance through the Educational Leadership Centre at the School of Education University of Waikato and the School Leaders project based on peer assisted leadership at Dunedin College of Education.

These programmes are filled with principals, who choose to come and want to learn. Some are fortunate enough to have funding provided from their Boards of Trustees. There are, however, principals who are not enrolling in these qualification or inservice courses. I would be interested to find out what these principals are learning, and how they are coping with their changed roles since their schools became self managing. We need to find ways of attracting them into professional development.

Sleigh (1993) in asking where principals learn management skills has this to say:

"It is no longer good enough to enrol at the school of hard knocks, hoping that experience – bitter or otherwise – will show you how to cope, with this litany of additional roles. Nor is it enough to shrug one's shoulders and say 'the central office' will help me when problems arise."

In the case of New Zealand's schools, the central office (Ministry of Education) does not have a role in providing support which schools enjoyed under the regime of district Education Boards. Formerly questions were answered on anything from property and maintenance issues to appointments. Wylie (1997) reiterates the need for principals to have access to the regional offices of the Ministry of Education. In her study one new rural principal made the telling comment:

"I don't know who they are. Whenever I ring there's only music."

This difficulty in reaching Ministry staff for information or advice was a feature of the rural and newly appointed principals' comments. The Education Review Office, unlike the former Inspectorate, is not allowed to offer advice. Their brief is merely to report on how schools are meeting the legislative requirements. As a result, there is a need for school principals to have networks which can fill these gaps in their knowledge and expertise as and when needed.

In New Zealand, a major professional development for many primary principals is the annual conference of the Principal's Federation. These are essentially passive forms of professional development for principals. The real questions are related to what principals do with the information

gained. For example:

Do many principals share the written papers with other staff or even talk about the conference speakers once back in their schools?

Sadly, the principals I surveyed indicated that they relied on information being sent to them. This reality is alarming given that were are talking about principals, who by this stage in their professional life should be independent learners capable of initiating their own learning.

Robertson (1993) also writes about the professional reading of New Zealand principals saying:

"Professional development is mainly done as they sort through paper on their desks. Intentional professional development appears not to exist."

Wylie (1997) refers to the paper war facing principals. The following comment from a new principal highlights the quantity of written material arriving in schools.

"... the paper keeps coming to me, so I flick through, and if it doesn't affect my kids at the moment, then I put it away. If it's about money, then I apply, I apply for everything."

It is worth remembering Barth's (1990) comments at this point. He reminds us that learning must be something principals do, not something others do to or for them. A question to consider then is whether the current situation is making our principals dependent rather than independent. Do our principals know what their learning needs are, and do they have ways of addressing these needs?

For Barth (1990) there are three important questions about which providers should be thinking. These are:

- 1 Under what conditions will principals become committed, lifelong learners in their important work?
- 2 Under what conditions will principals assume major responsibility for their learning?
- 3 What conditions can principals devise to encourage and support their own learning?

Conditions to Promote Learning

While acknowledging that the present political culture works against professional development, Hughes (1991) argues:

"The evidence is overwhelming that professional development requires teachers to work together and structures which support collegiality are important."

It is disturbing to note that schools and teachers in New Zealand are encouraged by the Government policy to be competitive rather than cooperative. A possible way forward then could be to explore this notion of collegiality in schools. Little (1981) provides the following definition of collegiality as being the presence of four specific behaviours:

- 1 Adults in schools talk about practice. These conversations about teaching and learning are frequent, concrete and precise.
- 2 Adults in schools observe each other engaged in the practice of teaching and administration. These observations become the practice to reflect and talk about.
- 3 Adults engage together in work on curriculum by planning, designing, researching, and evaluating curriculum.
- 4 Adults in schools teach each other what they know about teaching, learning and leading. Craft knowledge is revealed, articulated and shared.

While it is likely that principals may see the merits of the teaching staff working together in this way, they may have more difficulty including themselves in this learning owing to some of the hindrances noted earlier. One solution could be adopting quality learning circles where the principal is a member of the circle alongside other staff members. This is perhaps more likely to happen for principals in smaller schools or in teaching-principal roles. Principals of larger schools and in non-teaching roles would do well to adopt this practice as a way of staying in touch with learning and teaching matters.

School Improvement

Quality and the notion of continuous improvement are terms with which it is difficult to find fault. Everyone agrees that these are essential goals for all organisations. If schools were to use the impetus of the external reforms to improve to develop themselves, then we would see positive benefits. At the moment there are many schools which are locked into the survival mode, and are being ground down by workloads and pressures of constant curriculum change.

These underlying problems of workload

must be addressed at the same time as principals work for change. Schools need to overcome the potentially destructive effects of some aspects of the reforms, and make extra efforts to focus their professional development in constructive ways. Joyce (1991) suggests five strategies for school improvement:

- 1 **Collegiality**
Collaborative and professional relations are developed within a school staff and between their surrounding communities.
- 2 **Research**
A school staff studying research finds about, for example, effective school and teaching practices, or the process of change.
- 3 **Action research**
Teachers collect and analyse information and data about their classrooms and schools and their students' progress.
- 4 **Curriculum initiatives**
Changes are introduced within subject areas, or, as in the case of the computer, across curriculum areas.
- 5 **Teaching strategies**
Teachers discuss, observe, and acquire a range of teaching skills and strategies.

When schools demonstrate these five emphases, they are likely to be seen as communities of learners. It is important to note that there is a difference between using the school improvement rhetoric and being able to implement it. Barth (1991) argues schools or the communities of learners within them, need to discover what the conditions that elicit and support human learning are, and then to provide those conditions within them. Barth believes that more lasting development comes from within the school than from outside forces.

It is interesting then to see two solutions and identify the key players behind each. Barth (1991) raises two questions in this regard:

- 1 What should students, teachers, and principals know and do, and how do we get them to know and do it?

Schools are not attracted by such a stance in which they have little control over their own learning. Monitoring by government agencies, who know best and determine the agenda, seldom makes any long-term difference. When teachers own the process, gather their own data and are confronted by it, then there is more chance that improvements will be made.

The focus for the remaining approach is asking:

- 2 Under what conditions will the principal, students and teachers become serious, committed, sustained, lifelong and cooperative learners?

What is significant here is that all inhabitants of the schoolhouse are considered to be learners making the culture dynamic. Barth (1991) maintains that in this type of culture there are no big or little learners, each is a staff developer for the other.

I know which environment I would find more satisfying. While many would believe that their schools were automatically learning organisations, given that they were involved in teaching, MacNeill and Silcox (1996) believe this is not necessarily the case. It is therefore important to define what is meant by the term 'learning organisation'.

Learning Organisations

Senge (1990) defines a learning organisation as an organisation continually expanding its capacity to create its future. Four common, inclusive elements are provided for the existence of a learning organisation. These are that:

- 1 It can facilitate and promote learning at all levels.
- 2 It can transform the organisation and an individual's practices.
- 3 It can demonstrate organisational and individual improvement.
- 4 It is able to adapt to and lead change.

The role of management is therefore quite different in a learning organisation. Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell (1991) emphasise the practical involvement of the leader/manager/principal in three ways:

- 1 Always engaged in learning something.
- 2 Sharing and demonstrating new learning.
- 3 Making learning normal, legitimising it and encouraging others to do it.

Marquardt (1996) suggests the current model is ill adapted to the present environment of change and that schools need to be learning organisations. Marquardt maintains:

"The large dinosaur organisations with pea sized brains that flourished in the past, cannot breathe and survive in this new

atmosphere of rapid change and intense competition. The survival of the fittest is quickly becoming the fittest-to-learn."

Therefore if principals are to increase their fitness for learning, then further alternatives will need to be considered if principals are to head learners of learning communities in the future. It will not be enough to know why principals find it difficult to be learners. The development of principals' centres may be the answer.

Principals' Centre

The year 1997 has seen the beginnings of New Zealand's move to introduce a national principals' centre. For some time there have been local initiatives, eg Auckland Principals' Centre and the Educational Leadership Centre at the School of Education, University of Waikato. Several institutions have put forward proposals for the national centre. As before with previous initiatives, the intention is to reflect a partnership with the principals' organisations.

It is significant that New Zealand's principals are the most accountable in the whole of the Asia-Pacific area. While national systems of training, support and guidance have been offered by the School Support Services and the Advanced Studies for Teachers programmes, these have not impacted on all principals. It is argued that without a compulsory national system, little progress will be made beyond the present practice of providing help to those who ask for assistance.

If there were to be a curriculum for principals, as there is for teachers, then there would be a good chance that principals would be able to identify areas for future learning. The timing of such learning would be a matter of personal choice according to the need of an individual principal and included in the annual performance appraisal cycle. In this way, there would be a balance between being confident that principals were learning in their jobs, and principals determining their own learning needs at any particular time. In my opinion, such learning can no longer be left to chance. We need to provide a structure whereby all principals undertake regular professional development and benefit from their involvement.

Elsewhere, principals' centres have been developed. Barth (1991) describes the American Principals' Centres as being deliberately principal-centred. It is no surprise that activities are being developed from the concerns and aspirations of the principals themselves, and the ways in which they can be a resource to one another. A crucial factor here is that the

ownership of the programme remains with the principals. In New Zealand, the principals' organisations have been adamant that such a venture must not be captured by a tertiary unit. Also desirable are the notions that professional development be at all levels from undergraduate to PhD and accessible New Zealand wide through an advanced distance delivery. There are already a number of institutions throughout the country who are operating in these ways.

Three levels of certification are being suggested by the Australian Principals' Centres. These are:

- 1 Affiliate (preparation for the role of principal as career development for the aspirant principal or induction).
- 2 Associate fellow (developing principal leadership development).
- 3 Fellow (distinguished principal career development or diversity).

These relate directly to Huberman's stages of career development.

As New Zealand develops its first national Principals' Centre, a number of issues will need further consideration and resolution. Some of these issues are:

- 1 Determining whether central government has a role in supporting such an initiative.
- 2 How principal networks and shared learning can be maintained and encouraged, given the competitive pressures of education as a market.
- 3 Where the resources (eg time and funding) will come from in the self managing schools' context.
- 4 Whether certification is necessary.

At the moment however, the ownership question is the key concern. Clearly, the principals' organisations want to retain control yet are not able to provide the expertise in all areas without the support of tertiary institutions. On the other hand, tertiary institutions would be wise not to assume that they know what school principals need in professional development.

If structures such as the Principals' Centre could be developed to satisfy all the stakeholders, then perhaps we could be confident that our schools were indeed true learning organisations with principals as the head learners. In the meantime, we would do well to continue addressing issues such as workload and job remuneration to make the principalship an attractive occupation.

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