

Role of Distributed Leadership in Delivery of Quality Education: Examples from New Zealand research .

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Abstract

This presentation explores the characteristics of leadership in delivering quality educational outcomes through an exploration of quality leadership across policy evaluation and research studies carried out in New Zealand, and in particular at the University of Waikato. These projects range from long-term studies within schools to national policy evaluations. From these studies a number of common leadership issues arise. Leadership, including a vision for change and planning for action to implement this vision is crucial in any educational change. The notion that this leadership is something that is exercised by one individual is slowly being replaced by a view of leadership that distributed across multiple people and situations. There is also increasing evidence to support a strong relationship between distributed patterns of leadership and improved outcomes for schools, teachers, students and communities. This leads to consideration of extended leadership teams which may include new roles, new practices and new ways of operating. This includes increasing ways of collaborating both internal and external to the organisation as well as the development of networks. Change is also accelerated when there are joint and shared visions and problems/projects supported by effective leadership. Evidence is emerging of leadership that supports relationships and networks within a system combined with high levels of flexibility and autonomy that can lead to the delivery of high quality education. These characteristics will be supported by evidence of effective practice in schools and classrooms.

Introduction

As the education system continues to evolve in the 21st Century, more pressure is placed on the system in terms of the delivery of outcomes for diverse contexts and learners as well as other reforms. In the last 50 years we have seen a move to more localised decision-making for schools, a large number of range of policy initiatives from assessment through to ICT imposed on schools, and a change in the way leadership and management is conceptualised and operationalised. This paper considers how sound educational leadership and management can assist in addressing the many complex educational issues in the current education environment and make a difference for students, teachers, schools and the wider community.

In New Zealand the 'Tomorrow's Schools' reforms legislated in the Education Act (1989) created what are known as 'self-managing' schools; self-managing schools have substantial autonomy over finances and resources, including human resources, and also over teaching programmes. The goal was to increase parental involvement in education and allow for more parental choice of school for their children. The Act established for each school a board of trustees that is responsible for setting the direction of a school, within the parameters of regulation; responsible for appointing the school principal; and is accountable for the

school's performance to the Education Review Office (an independent audit agency) and the Ministry of Education. Boards are comprised of elected members of the school community, the principal, a staff representative and, in the case of secondary schools, a student representative. Boards provide strategic guidance and a monitoring framework through which to assess the progress towards strategic directions. School management, under the leadership of the principal, is accountable to the board for the performance of the school. Thus, since 1989, principalship has been conceptualised as having two dimensions. The principal is responsible for teaching and learning programmes to deliver the national curriculum and for the management of all human, financial and other resources.

Notions of leadership

Spillane and colleagues (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004; Spillane, 2006) provide evidence that leadership is stretched over people and distributed over the materials and artifacts that are part of the organization and social structures of schools. Copland (2003) notes that effective leadership in schools involves individuals both internal and external to a school

...leadership is a set of functions or qualities shared across a much broader segment of the school community that encompasses administrators, teachers, and other professionals and community members both internal and external to the school (p. 376).

Elmore (2002) emphasizes that this distribution of leadership does not mean that those in formal leadership positions, particularly the principal, can abdicate their responsibilities. Distribution of leadership does not imply distributing the leadership functions in terms of delegation either. Fullan (2003, 2005) proposes that when the goal is sustainable systemic change individuals at the level of the state, the region, and the school need to provide leadership for change, and, more than this, they need to work together across the levels to promote and support change. Leaders at each of these three levels thus need to be adept at working with policies and practices within and across the levels. Distributed leadership is primarily concerned with mobilizing leadership at all levels in the organisation not just relying on leadership from the top. It is about engaging many rather than the few in leadership activity within the school and actively distributing leadership practice. The emphasis is about leadership practice and a distributed model of leadership is one premised upon the interactions between many leaders rather than the actions of an individual leader.

Schools are becoming more complex places. In the future they will need to be more responsive to a rapidly changing environment and set of circumstances. They will need structures that are versatile and responsive to shifting needs and priorities. Therefore the leadership practice has to also be adaptive, flexible and highly responsive to external and internal pressures for change. This will require new forms of leadership and decision making processes that are distributed within, between and across schools and communities.

National policy can stimulate and support change through the provision of direction and or resources intended to develop particular capacities (Hannaway & Woodroffe, 2003). National policy is however interpreted and implemented by organizations and individuals at the various levels of the educational system. Any interpretations made and actions taken will depend on the interaction between the policy, knowledge, beliefs, current practices of the organizations and individuals, and the setting, which has itself been shaped by responses to previous policy initiatives (Spillane, 2004).

There is increasing evidence to support a strong relationship between distributed patterns of leadership and improved student outcomes. This paper highlights five long-term studies that explore the importance of leadership and improved outcomes for teachers and students. These studies examine the introduction of ICT, new curriculum areas, raising achievement for Maori (indigenous people of New Zealand) and enhancing literacy practices. The ICT project was spread over 7 years and involved over 2000 teachers, the curriculum projects involved more than 12 schools, 25 teachers and principals and 600 students. The raising achievement for Maori project (Te Kotahitanga) which seeks to support teachers and schools to implement an effective teaching profile in their classrooms and schools so as to bring about changes in Maori students' participation, engagement with learning and achievement involved 33 schools, 2453 teachers, facilitators, principals and senior management, and 9935 students. The literacy projects undertook evaluations on the national basis. This set of studies therefore provides a large data set through which leadership issues can be explored.

Integration of ICT and distributed leadership

The integration of information and communication technologies [ICT] into schools has been a focus of a plethora of policy initiatives by governments worldwide for over twenty years. Zhao, Pugh, Sheldon, & Byers (2002) noted that aspects of the school context including administrator support, school technological infrastructure and the extent to which peers supported and encouraged the innovator impacted on the success of the innovation. Tearle (2004), who analyzed ICT integration in three schools in the United Kingdom, came to a similar conclusion. She argues the need for a whole-school vision for ICT use, along with a role for school characteristics, culture and ethos that support change, all coupled with the practical support and the visible involvement of the principal. Research by Anderson and Dexter (2005) endorses the importance of the principal in establishing a technology committee and budget, personally using technology, spending time on and budgeting for technology integration, however, they conclude that leadership and planning for ICT integration is more a school than an individual characteristic. Leadership for ICT requires an overview of the technology itself, along with skills to manage the changes in school structures and systems and the teaching and learning processes that can arise from the use of ICT (Cuban, Kilpatrick, & Peck, 2001). Moreover, when systemic sustainable change is the goal there is a need to consider systemic issues (Fishman, Marx, Blumenfeld, Krajcik, & Soloway, 2004). That is, there is a need to look beyond the individual leader and even what is happening in an individual school, to consider the ways that the wider educational and political context including policy, professional development planning and the provision of resources, both shapes and constrains what happens. Researchers investigating innovation across school sites have concluded that the processes of initiating, transferring and sustaining innovative ICT practices within and across different school systems involve very different challenges and issues indicating the impact of the national context (Kankaanranta, 2005).

In the national evaluation of the 'Laptops for Teachers' (TELA) evaluation (Cowie, Jones and Harlow, 2009) we explored the implications of this and other Ministry of Education policy initiatives to consider the ways the New Zealand government has provided, or not, direction and resources to support school and teacher ICT use. Teacher commentary indicated they experienced leadership for laptop use as being distributed over people and groups at all levels of the school system. Specifically, leadership was distributed over people involved in school governance, over senior school managers including the principal, over those with formal responsibilities for ICT within a school, and over departmental leaders and teachers as leaders in the classroom.

Leadership distributed over school governors

In the initial stages, a leadership decision was required at the school governance level that a school would take part in the TELA scheme. In three of the eight case study schools board of trustee commitment to ICT use and the benefits they could envision for teacher access to TELA laptops played a key role in the impact of the scheme. In one school, the board's understanding of the potential for teacher laptop access to influence ICT use within the school was a crucial factor in the decision to fund teacher laptops. Those interviewed explained that their board and principal were actively pursuing a vision for ICT integration and were fully behind the scheme, to the extent of paying the lease costs. Teachers were aware of the financial implications of a board paying for teacher laptops and appreciated the board paying some, or all, of the lease. They saw this as a sign that the board valued teachers' use of ICT. In another school, the board initially viewed the laptop as a personal item and did not fund the lease. The appointment of a deputy principal, who incidentally had expertise in and enthusiasm for ICT use, played an important role in changing this situation when the board realized that teachers accessing TELA laptops would be a cost-effective strategy to promote another initiative.

Leadership distributed over school leaders and those with expertise in ICT

Subsequent to a school entering the scheme, school policies and practices determined the incentives and opportunities teachers had to use the laptops. Leadership for this purpose was exercised by a range of people from enthusiastic classroom teachers, to heads of department, to those in senior management positions including the principal. School policies about acceptable use reflected a meld of the TELA scheme requirements and the benefits and opportunities that formal school leaders envisioned for teacher access to a laptop for their exclusive use. Some schools restricted teacher acceptable use of the laptops to school-related tasks; others allowed laptop use for all but inappropriate and objectionable tasks. Schools with a more flexible approach considered all use could contribute to use for professional purposes. Teachers were very appreciative of this sort of detailed planning and the implicit valuing and support for their efforts in using the laptops. In some schools, a lack of ongoing leadership to bring about successful ongoing support for laptop use had led to integration problems. In schools where there was little active senior level leadership for ICT the resulting vacuum was filled, or not, at the departmental level by heads of department and/or teachers with enthusiasm for and expertise in ICT. In these schools, ICT/laptop use was inconsistent and support for use was generally thought to be poor or inadequate by those interviewed. It would seem that leadership is important for initiating and sustaining the conditions that support teacher utilisation of laptops and for helping teachers extend their use of the laptops. Without a clear vision at the senior management level leadership, school-wide development may be haphazard and ad hoc, dependent upon individual capability and interest. Senior level leadership was crucial because of the financial implications, irrespective of school initial infrastructure. Leadership and/or modeling from the principal or senior management was considered influential in the development of whole school electronic systems for administration, data management, and communication. Principal and senior management leadership is essential if teachers are to have time within the school day to pursue collegial and personal learning opportunities. Time was the most commonly identified support needed to help teachers make more use of their laptop for teaching

Leadership distributed over subject department leaders

Teachers in each component of the study identified peer mentoring and collegial support as the main mechanism for enhancing their use of the laptops for teaching and learning: around two thirds (68%) of questionnaire respondents in both 2004 and 2005 had been helped by school ICT staff and a half by other teachers. Collegial help was described by those interviewed as the preferred and most prevalent form of professional development. The mentoring and collegial support provided by same subject colleagues for ICT use in teaching and learning was seen to be especially valuable because it was in context. Same subject colleagues as mentors provided access to models of how a laptop could be used for teaching within the setting teachers found themselves. Department based leadership for teaching could be provided by either the head of department and/or an ICT expert within a department, although leadership by an enthusiast was said to be facilitated when the designated department leader provided time for sharing of ideas and expertise during department meetings and encouraged and supported teachers visiting each other's classrooms. Leadership was needed to encourage the development and sharing of electronic lesson materials. It was important that someone, usually the head of department, took responsibility for setting up and maintaining a well-organized central repository for lesson materials.

Leadership distributed over classroom teachers

Ultimately, it is teachers in their classrooms, through their interaction with students, who enact change. Teachers are the leaders of learning in their classroom (McGee, 1997). Laptops have liberated teachers in terms of their teaching practice, and some of them are quite excited about all the new innovations and how these can help their students learn better. Each year, a majority of questionnaire respondents and the focus group and case study teachers identified making more use of ICT in their teaching as a main goal for further development and information on how to do this as their greatest professional developmental need.

Leadership distributed over time

The impact of the wider policy context on teacher laptop use was not an explicit focus for the TELA evaluation but there was some evidence that, as Spillane (2004) has pointed out the implementation of a particular policy depends not only on teacher and school interpretation of that policy, but also on previous policies as they had become embedded in school policies and priorities, teaching materials, and teaching practices. The differences in the case study school technological infrastructure highlight this point. The efficient and effective use of technology requires a reliable, robust and ubiquitous access to hardware, software and technical support. These aspects have knowledge and expertise, time, financial and resource implications and costs, which schools can only meet over time. Schools that had not previously invested in ICT were in a qualitatively different position from those who had as the inception of the TELA scheme, pointing to the impact of leadership decisions over time at the level of school governance. Schools that had invested not only had better facilities, but also more on-site expertise to allow them to optimize the potential of teacher laptops. Focus group and case study teachers in each of the yearly cycles of data collection discussed this as an equity issue for both teachers and students.

Leadership and outcomes for students

The implementation of any national policy and its associated evaluation needs to be considered in the context in which schools are situated in relation to the broader social context of the relationship between government policy and the way schools are governed and managed in New Zealand. [The NZ Curriculum Framework](#) and the recent draft curriculum place school curriculum decisions in the hands of the local school and community with a

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focus on high expectation for all students and more flexibility for teacher and schools to help students to achieve those expectations.

Leadership for curriculum change and implementation is more effective when there is a strategy associated with developing and supporting professional learning communities within schools rather than focusing on individual change. Research from two long term classroom projects (Jones & Moreland, 2005 and Cowie, Moreland, Jones and Otrrel-Cass, 2008) suggests effective change can occur when the conditions are set up in the school to allow for effective, collective focus, with collaboration and sharing by teachers and where student achievement is shared. In this process teachers gather evidence, reflect on practice based on evidence and take collective responsibility for student achievement (Timperley, 2005). Effective professional learning has structure and collegial focus around student engagement and achievement with a focus on practice. To achieve this requires effective management and leadership from the school leaders. Planning for change is required not just focusing on planning for implementation (Akerman, Anderson and Anderson (2001). For school leaders this results in a need to build an integrated change strategy as part of school leadership and management rather than just 'implementing a curriculum'. This also relates to the implementation of Government policy for schools and the way in which policy is interpreted and operationalised in the school setting. Structures are required that include time for reflection and sharing. These meetings are more effective when they occur in school time. School improvements require a commitment to ensuring effective systemic change where there is a need to build clear organisational processes and infrastructure.

The factors that contributed to schoolwide change in assessment for learning practices were investigated (Jones & Moreland, 2005). The evidence indicated that significant changes had occurred in the school including the raising of student achievement. The culture of the school was seen as an important factor in sustaining and implementing changes at the schoolwide level. The culture was described as one that allowed teachers to show initiative, take risks, question, examine and reflect. The principal built a trustworthy, supportive school culture focussing on developing curriculum knowledge, self-examination and questioning, risk-taking and reflective attitudes. The staff saw the principal as crucial in that she was focused on being an effective leader and on teaching and learning. Research findings were incorporated into whole school planning, assessment for learning practices and reporting systems. The culture of sharing information in the school as well as team planning assisted the dissemination process. It was the gains in students and classroom practices that encouraged other teachers to try out some of the ideas from the project. Although the positive research outcomes in terms of student learning had a significant impact on the uptake of the ideas and the culture of the school expedited this, the teachers also commented that the nature of the research had a significant impact. The teachers saw that an essential part of the research/professional development relationship was working together on a common problem. The joint nature of the problem and collaborative relationship between the different groups was seen as significant. The long time frame was crucial for assisting and sustaining change as it provided time to build a strong supportive relationship between leaders and teachers to plan modifications, trial ideas and reflect on success. Time ensured a long period for analysis, reconceptualisation, discussion and dissemination of results. It gave opportunities to step back from the work and reflect, granting scope for rethinking and synthesis. Teachers were their own change agents and a willingness to change was required for successfully modifying teaching practice and shifting thinking. Therefore, time for teachers to engage in intellectual and professional conversation was in-built. Time was required to create a mutually respectful inquiring community so the shared interest of enhancing teaching and learning could be fostered.

A third project design to raise Maori students' achievement in mainstream schools, Bishop, O'Sullivan and Berryman (in press) identified the following characteristics of effective leadership for supporting change in schools for teachers to raise student achievement. Effective leadership:

- Establishes and develops measurable goals in order that progress can be shown, monitored over time and acted upon
- Supports teachers to set specific goals rather than unspecified changes;
- Promotes and supports pedagogic reform and enhancement of classroom interactions
- Creates, promotes and develops professional learning communities;
- Redesign and refine organisational frameworks to support reform
- Spreads the reform so parents and community are engaged;
- Develop the capacity of people and systems to identify, gather, analyse and use evidence to enhance practice; and,
- Takes ownership and resourcing of project.

It is not only what occurs in schools that is crucial but also the way Government policy through the development of particular initiatives can support leaders. For example, it has been found that Literacy Development Offices (who work with a range of schools) can help principals to raise literacy levels for students by assisting principals to develop evidence based practice in their schools by using a range of assessment data, deprivatising classrooms in a climate of trust, co-ordinating networks, engaging in joint planning and joint projects (Alcorn, Wright & McKim, 2008). Reform around literacy requires schoolwide engagement and responses around developing learning communities with a view to enhancing practice. The evaluation of the Secondary Literacy Programme (Wright, May, Whitehead, Smyth & Smyth, 2005) highlights that school leaders can be pivotal to the long term success of a literacy initiative if they:

- Actively and visibly support literacy (e.g. attend PD sessions, promote literacy to staff, students, school community);
- Allocate a sufficient budget to support literacy (e.g. for teacher relief, physical and virtual resources);
- Understand teacher and organizational change and its potentially destabilizing effects in the short term; and
- Promote changes to school systems and processes to support a literacy focus (e.g. appraisal, timetables, class allocations, computer networks, uses of diagnostic tests).

Indeed Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (in press) show that the close involvement of leadership in establishing an academic mission, monitoring and providing feedback on teaching and learning and promoting the importance of professional learning has nearly four times the impact on students outcomes than does transformational leadership.

Leadership and distributed networks

Networking and collegiality among participating teachers does seem to be an important condition for enhancing policy initiatives. The importance of developing networks both internally and externally to the learning organisation was apparent in a number of the research studies. This includes networking with colleagues in and out of the school and across schools. An Assessment for Learning Project (Cowie, Moreland, Jones and OtréCass, 2008) actively supported teachers from different schools to work on shared problems over three years. The teachers shared experiences and developed research questions, reflected on their practice,

developed classroom material and analysed evidence including student work. This network provided an essential infrastructure for the delivery of student outcomes.

Similarly, the development of ICT clusters has been an important aspect of building teacher capability around new technologies. These clusters do not just develop but are planned for, with time allocations and resources if they are to be sustainable. Informal clusters are not always as robust. It is not just networks of teachers but as Harris (2005) highlights the ability to work and lead beyond the individual school is of increasing importance.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that distributed leadership models can result in improved outcomes for teachers and students. Distributed leadership requires high levels of trust, transparency, shared problems as well as a commitment to horizontal and vertical engagement both internal and external to the organisation. Fundamental to this is clear articulation of the goals and processes to realise these goals through effective planning rather than direct implementation. Effective leaders are engaged in the goals/problems and manage time and resources to meet those goals. Distributed leadership needs to be an organisational condition and as such needs to be planned for, inclusive and promoted, including a clear understanding of change processes. It is often assumed that distributed leadership means delegating certain tasks rather than it is a process where distributed leadership is the result of shared activity, discussion or dialogue rather than the handing out of tasks. Distributed leadership is a communication system and process by which the organisation learns and develops and therefore will vary from context to context in terms of its operationalisation. However, distributing leadership over more people is risky and may result in the greater distribution of incompetence. Timperley (2005) suggest that increasing the distribution of leadership is only desirable if the quality of the leadership activities contributes to assisting teachers to become more effective.

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