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Leadership in our secondary schools: good people, inadequate systems

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Leadership in our secondary schools: good people, inadequate systems

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Abstract

The contexts in which Aotearoa New Zealand leaders learn and work have improved in some respects from 30 years ago and deteriorated in others. The improvements include a significant shift away from heroic, often dictatorial, models of leadership towards a greater focus on the many layers and types of leadership required for secondary schools to be successful. The deterioration in leaders being able to learn together across our state school system is created by high levels of competition among state secondary schools and by the inability of the Ministry of Education to have as much influence as might be hoped for in a state education system on the learning – by adults as well as children – in schools. In many parts of the country non- Māori school leaders now have the ability to know much more about hapu and iwi history relevant to their setting than was the case 30 years ago, including through the work of the Waitangi Tribunal.

The “balkanisation” of our school system has become more pronounced over the last 30 years, as have the challenges resulting from the growing socio-economic divide between our poorest state schools and our most affluent. The “hands-off” approach from the Ministry of Education and successive governments regarding school zones has damaged the integrity and efficiency of our state school system. Several bitter pay disputes between governments of the day and the secondary teachers’ union, the Post-Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA) especially, have meant that shared commitments by teachers’ representatives and the Ministry of Education to plan well for teacher supply for our state secondary schools have been difficult to achieve. Teacher supply challenges have added to the pressures on senior and middle leaders of the state schools serving our lowest socio-economic communities especially.

Keywords: *Leadership; change; education; design thinking; systems thinking*

Introduction

My experience of educational leadership has been limited to working in New Zealand state secondary schools and being involved in some education sector-wide groups. My educational leadership practice has been formed to a limited degree only by any of the New Zealand official documentation on educational leadership, although there are some notable exceptions such as some of the ideas in the Ministry of Education’s Best Evidence Synthesis series (for example Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009) and in the work of the Starpath Project (for example, McKinley, Madjar,

van der Merwe, Smith, Sutherland & Yuan, 2009). The most interesting educational leadership roles I have had included being a Head of Department (HOD) in a Form 7–13 school in Te Tai Tokerau/Northland; being president of the PPTA, and in that role needing to advocate for secondary school teachers when the National Party government of the day wanted to undermine their union and control teachers' work more than before, rather than to grow their capacity as professionals; being a principal of a large, multicultural school in Auckland; and chairing the New Zealand Secondary Principals' Council. I grew up and began my teaching career in what seemed at the time to be a very mono-cultural Christchurch. Non-Māori educators and school leaders are now much more able to develop a bicultural understanding of the history of the area they work in than was the case in the past.

Over the last 30 years there has been an increasing balkanisation of our state secondary school system, and growing inequity within the system. This was predicted to happen at the time of the Tomorrow's Schools reforms (Barry, 2007; Codd, 1993). We have significant, if informal, segregation within our state school system, especially in Auckland, as evidenced by the ethnic and cultural profile of the students (Gordon, 2015; Salesa, 2017), and caused in part by practices around secondary school zones, again especially in Auckland, which sometimes work against the interests of students from lower socio-economic areas (Lubienski, Lee & Gordon, 2013; Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, 2018; Vester, 2018). Nationally we have done too little to support those schools which serve our communities suffering the most from economic deprivation, as documented by the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce (2018, p. 29):

Unlike many other OECD countries we put fewer resources into supporting our students who come from disadvantaged homes: about 3% of school operational funding (including staffing costs) compared with around 6% in comparable jurisdictions. We don't provide those schools serving students with the greatest challenges with additional teaching staff, nor the same level of wraparound services as some other high performing countries. Our current approach to school funding and staffing does not result in every school being able to meet their students' needs.

The planning for secondary teacher supply has also fallen well short of ensuring that we have a steady supply of well-qualified and well-trained teachers for our secondary schools. In my experience there has been a move away from very top/down models of school leadership which I experienced before the introduction of Tomorrow's Schools through until the early days after its introduction, caused in large part by the growing complexity of secondary school principals' roles, and those of other senior and middle leaders (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, 2018; Wylie, 2012). An overall conclusion I reach is that we do not

have a coherent, long term strategy for growing and supporting leaders in our state secondary schools, and there is little scope for state schools to learn from each other. There is a high price to be paid for the resulting fragmentation, especially by those school leaders who have the most difficult challenges – those who work in schools serving our most economically disadvantaged communities.

Monoculturalism ruled

I grew up in St Martins, Christchurch/Otautahi. In my teenage years I crossed the Heathcote River biking to what was then called Linwood High School (later “rebranded” as Linwood College), completely oblivious of the possibility that that river had (of course) an earlier name... Ōpāwaho. The standard history of Canterbury in the years I was growing up was in three volumes published between 1957 and 1971 by the Canterbury Centennial Association. It totalled some 1370 pages. The first page of the first volume makes no mention of Māori whatsoever, but rather refers to “pioneer settlers” and “their successors”. Thereafter seventeen pages only are devoted to Māori history prior to the arrival of Europeans. There is a subsequent chapter in that same volume, Chapter VII, of some nine pages entitled *Extinguishing the Māori Title*. It states that the Ngai-tahu (their spelling) Claim Settlement Act of 1944 had dealt with the grievances Ngāi Tahu had had arising from the processes by which they lost almost all their land (Hight & Straubel, 1957). But that, of course, was not true then from a Ngāi Tahu perspective, and was demonstrated to be not true to a much wider audience once Ngāi Tahu’s claim was heard by the Waitangi Tribunal from the late 1980s.

The HOD History at Linwood High School when I was a student there was Harry Evison. After his time as HOD History at Linwood, Evison wrote several books outlining for a Pākehā audience especially the interactions between Ngāi Tahu and European settlers and the agents of their governments; for example, *Te Wai Pounamu, the Greenstone Island* (1993) and *The Ngai Tahu Deeds: A window on New Zealand History* (2007). He also acted as a researcher for Ngāi Tahu when their claims were being heard by the Waitangi Tribunal. His work in that process was acknowledged by Ngāi Tahu (Ngāi Tahu, undated) and by others, such as Professor Alan Ward (1989, p. 2) who had been appointed as an expert historian by the Tribunal. Evison’s work was an example of what Ranganui Walker described in another context as “reminders of historical facts that shaped a nation, particularly the more unsavoury aspects for which historical amnesia was the prevailing palliative” (Walker, 2001, p. 129). Evison’s detailed and extensive work was a notable example of a Pākehā historian making aspects of shared Māori /Pākehā history both accessible to Pākehā and respected by Māori.

Many more resources of that kind are now available for use by Pākehā leaders in schools from professional historians such as Vincent O’Malley (2016; 2019) to supplement the outcomes of hearings in front of the Waitangi Tribunal and the stories of local people, and that is to be

applauded. What might give added impetus to school leaders making more use of those resources, on top of their desire to know more about their schools' local history, is the move to make more teaching of New Zealand history compulsory (Ministry of Education, 2019).

Reconfiguring school leadership over the last 30 years

My first formal educational leadership role was Teacher-Librarian in a Christchurch boys' school. I was in my third year of teaching. I had a library committee of Heads of Department who acted as a sounding board, but I did not report to that committee or to any HOD or senior manager. In 1985 I became an HOD in a quite different school with around 500 students in a small rural town in Te Tai Tokerau/Northland. In my 11 years in that role I met once only with one of the two school's principals during my tenure to discuss my work, and that was prompted by his imminent attendance at a course on appraisal – teacher appraisal was a novel concept at that time – which he took me to. There was no appraisal system in the school at that time, nor did one emerge during my time in that school. My noting that should not be interpreted as support for what later became excessively burdensome appraisal systems in schools, but to highlight the lack of *any* professional discussions between middle and senior leaders in the pre-Tomorrow's Schools era in my experience at least. Looking back now on the years when I was an HOD (1985–1996) it also seems remarkable that the HODs and other middle leaders in that school never met as a group, apart from attending annual meetings to relearn the arcane art of transforming School Certificate results in one year into grade allocations by subject for Sixth Form Certificate in the following year. In other words, there was no mechanism in the school for middle leaders to discuss school-wide issues pertaining to teaching and learning or almost anything else.

There was also no professional development initiated by the school to prepare me for the HOD role or to sustain me in it. The initial leadership or curriculum specific training I accessed was limited to a school inspector in the Christchurch regional office of the Department of Education providing me with a large array of teaching resources before I headed north to take on the new role. Once in the job I attended a number of Teachers' Refresher Course Committee (TRCC) courses, sought advice from centrally-funded English Advisors, and was active in the Tai Tokerau Association of Teachers of English. I also undertook some extramural, academic study in pastoral care and educational leadership during this time. None of these professional learning activities was fostered by the school's senior leadership team, and that was in large part a reflection of their not participating in any significant professional development themselves.

Reflecting now on changes in school leadership in the last 30 years, one of the changes which stands out for me is evidence of greater collaboration across and between levels of leadership within schools compared to the past. On the whole I suspect senior leaders are much more encouraging of important issues impacting on their schools being discussed more openly among their teaching staff, and to some degree across their school community as well, than used to be the case. This

phenomenon is surely a result of school leaders facing many more complex challenges than was the case 30 years ago. The Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce noted as much: "Tomorrow's Schools significantly expanded the role of the principal/tumuaki by asking them to take on wide and extensive responsibilities related to property, finance, and staff employment" (2018, p. 97). We could also add the pressures created by the growing list of legislation that principals need to ensure their schools comply with—37 pieces of legislation according to the Ministry of Education (2019b)—and the increasingly complex leadership challenges and dilemmas schools face. Examples of the latter include designing curriculum pathways that work well for all senior secondary school students, and the impact on secondary schools of students' inappropriate, unwise or damaging behaviour online. Online bullying, for example, can have unpredictable and very damaging ripple effects in secondary schools—all of which middle and senior leaders have to respond to as well as they can in the most concerted manner they can muster. When such events occurred when I was a principal it could take the combined efforts of the senior leadership team, the pastoral care team and the school's counsellors to work through a strategy that might have a hope of success. Serious incidents of this nature could also rattle teachers generally so staff meetings might be needed to allow concerns to be aired and responses to be co-constructed or explained. The need for that kind of consultation was the exception, thankfully. Much more common was consultation across senior and middle leader groups to do with a myriad of issues affecting teaching and learning.

Regular meetings of middle leadership teams have become crucially important in driving key issues in secondary schools. Complex issues surrounding senior students' courses and related assessment processes and procedures, for example, along with complex pastoral care and learning needs for growing numbers of students identified as having special learning needs demand coherent responses from secondary schools' middle leaders in ways that did not apply with the same force 30 years ago. The requirements of high stakes internal assessment have clearly taken their toll regarding curriculum leaders' workloads (Alison, 2005; Ingvarson et. al., 2005; PPTA, 2016).

Another important aspect of recent middle leadership opportunities has been the creation of ad hoc teams of teachers in schools to drive specific, important innovations. Two examples come to mind especially: the *Te Kotahitanga* team (<https://tekotahitanga.tki.org.nz/>) we put together when my school was part of that project, and the *Positive Behaviour for Learning* team (<https://pb4l.tki.org.nz/>) put together to lead processes for influencing student behaviour in new ways. Both created new opportunities for teachers to collaborate and for new middle leadership roles to be formed, and both had implicit in them new ways of connecting the middle leaders involved with senior leaders in the school.

Thus, in recent times much greater focus has been placed on the importance of "middle leaders" in secondary schools, and their roles have expanded. Despite national working parties being set up to address the workload issues of secondary schools' teachers including middle leaders (PPTA et al, 2016), nothing very constructive appears to have come out of them. Moreover, as

Highfield (undated) in a “think piece” published by the Education Council noted, there has not been any national strategy to provide training for middle leaders, more evidence that we struggle to think of our state school system as a national system. I ensured that some training was available for newly appointed middle leaders in the school I was principal of via a private provider of professional learning and development in Auckland, and those middle leaders received ongoing mentoring within the school from a senior leader. I also helped organise a TRCC course for middle leaders on behalf of NZEALS in 2012. The training and mentoring by schools or by groups such as the TRCC was not matched by any coherent training provision at a national level, however.

As bad as the lack of a national training strategy for middle leaders was the inadequacy of the extra pay for these important leadership roles, via “units”. These did not move in value from 2009 until the most recent secondary teachers’ pay negotiations in 2019 (PPTA, 2018, p. 7). The rhetoric about the importance of these roles was not matched adequately by the salaries for them, and that, combined with the increased workload associated with curriculum and pastoral care leadership in secondary schools, made getting suitable applicants to fill vacancies very difficult indeed. In my time as a principal (2003–2014) it was not uncommon to have one or two applicants only for a faculty leader position – the most senior of our middle leader positions.

It is my observation that senior leadership teams in secondary schools generally work much more collaboratively now than was the case in the pre-Tomorrow’s Schools era. In the earlier period those in the three traditional senior roles, principal, deputy principal and senior master/mistress, appeared to have narrowly defined roles, and in the three schools I worked in during that period there was very little sense that the “senior management team”, as they were called then, did any significant planning together beyond that needed to keep the school functioning at a basic level. There was limited consultation with staff, as well, because with a lack of forward planning there was seemingly little to consult about.

These days it is very different given the complex issues facing schools and the legal requirement to create and report on strategic plans. For example, when I was a principal it took considerable consultation with the teaching staff to introduce our version of academic counselling and ways to engage with parents and caregivers about their students’ academic progress, ideas about which came from the Starpath model of academic coaching (McKinley et al., 2009), because we were asking teachers, form teachers and deans to undertake new, quite complex tasks. However, principals whose schools had not been part of that project were not likely to know anything about its key findings. Those findings have not travelled well even within Auckland, where the project originated in a collaboration between Massey High School and the University of Auckland. This became obvious when, in an Auckland Secondary Schools Principals’ Association meeting in 2014, an Auckland principal, whose school had not been involved in Starpath, betrayed no knowledge whatsoever of the project’s existence when talking to the meeting about a process he was introducing in his school, which was “Starpath-lite” in effect.

The Ministry of Education had no reliable mechanism to let schools who were not involved in Starpath know about the benefits its models brought to schools' engagement with the students' learning and with those students' caregivers. That observation is true for many Ministry of Education initiatives. For example, I was in an unusual position when the School Leadership Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009) was released. I had taken five terms' leave from being a principal to work in Team Solutions (Schools' Support Services) at the University of Auckland as a leadership and management facilitator. In that role I had time to read the BES thoroughly, and I took the opportunity to run several workshops for middle and senior school leaders in Auckland and Northland on two of its important concepts: "open-to-learning conversations" and "engaging with teachers' theories of action". I thought both concepts were interesting and useful for school leaders. The spread of these ideas was more random than I would have hoped for, though, in a state school system which had funded the creation of them in large part.

The competitive model of state schooling makes it very difficult to have significant collaborative learning from school to school

What has become more pronounced over the last 30 years are the unfair challenges facing state schools serving our poorest communities, and thereby the challenges facing their leaders. Part of the problem facing those schools is the stigma that has become attached to the term "decile":

Decile has become a synonym for quality and low decile schools are perceived by many as schools for those who have no choice. Furthermore, despite the absence of ethnicity in the decile calculation, the "low decile" label marks ethnicity, thereby colouring community perceptions about schools (Vester, 2018, p. 5).

We have increasing levels of informal segregation within our school system. The Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce (2018) noted recently, for example, that while "24% of our school students overall are served by decile 1–3 schools ... 45% of our Māori students, and 60% of our Pacific students attend decile 1–3 schools" (p. 71). Damon Salesa, Pro-Vice Chancellor–Pacific at the University of Auckland and a Board chairperson of a decile 1 collegiate, has written powerfully about this issue noting that racial segregation as it affects New Zealand's Pacific Island peoples is "ordinary in Auckland but it is extraordinary to talk about it" (Salesa, 2017, p. 35).

There is also a trend that has been conspicuous for several years since the decile system was introduced in 1995 of high decile schools getting larger and low decile schools getting smaller:

In our consultations across the country, we heard of many students bypassing their well performing local school based on the assumption that a higher decile school would guarantee higher quality teaching and results. In 2017, the number of students in decile 8–10 schools was 280,209, up from 201,153 in 1996. By contrast, the

number of students in decile 1–3 schools in 2017 was 179,929, down from 188,089 in 1996 (Tomorrow’s Schools Independent Taskforce, 2018, p. 69).

This trend has been exacerbated by some secondary schools in our larger centres marketing their schools to the detriment of other schools in their vicinity. Vester, himself a former long-serving principal of a low decile school in Auckland, notes that principals he spoke to were “concerned about the active marketing, often in areas well outside natural zone or catchment areas, via scholarships for able sports or academic students and in some cases by some highly questionable releases of achievement and school profile data” (p. 14). This trend has led to some secondary schools having an extraordinary proportion of their roll come from outside their zone. Auckland’s Avondale College is an extreme example of this: 62% of their total roll of 2760 in 2018 came from outside their zone (p. 22). My personal contact with several secondary school principals in that part of Auckland has revealed significant levels of anger and frustration at what they see as predatory behaviour when another state school is allowed to have that quantity of out-of-zone students. As well, some dubious behaviour around how school zones are sometimes created to exclude lower socio-economic populations (Lubienski, Lee & Gordon, 2013; PPTA Waikato Region, 2014; Thrupp, 2007) works against the interests of low decile schools, their students and their leaders, and those issues can make the formation of trusting relationships between leaders in state schools very difficult to achieve.

Some elements of the issues raised above may change shortly. The current government is committed to replace the decile funding system within the next two years, and it has announced in its response to the Tomorrow’s Schools Independent Taskforce’s reports that it intends the Ministry of Education or another central government body yet to be created (the proposed Education Service Agency) to take decision-making about the design of zones off schools (MOE, 2019b). Despite these proposed changes, the detrimental impacts on numbers of state school leaders described above will linger for years to come.

Teacher supply

One issue which nearly always puts significant pressure on middle and senior leaders in secondary schools is the unsatisfactory nature of the processes we use to ensure that we have adequate numbers of suitably trained and qualified teachers for all our secondary schools. In the period under discussion this issue has caused the sector to lurch from crisis to crisis, with little evidence of successful long-term planning and consequentially relatively short periods of industrial peace following bruising pay rounds between the PPTA and the governments of the day. At the time of the introduction of Tomorrow’s Schools the proposed “bulk funding” of teachers’ salaries led to a considerable fight between the Lange-led Labour Government and the teacher unions (Grant, 2003, pp. 249–272). That fight continued until “bulk funding” was removed as a policy by a subsequent government in 1999.

Table 1. Secondary School Teachers' pay claims, government initial offers and settlements (based on a PPTA internal document, sourced 10 March 2020)

Year	Initial pay increase claimed	Government opening offer	Settlement (at the top of the base salary scale)
1989	7%	0%	0.67% after 2 days of strike action
1990	7%	0%	4.25% after 1 day of strike action
1992	4%	0%	0.0% after 2 days of strike action
1994	2% + \$1,000 lump sum	2%	2% + \$600 lump sum after 2 days of strike action
1995	21%	3%	12.5% after 6 days of strike action
1997	12.5%	2%	3.8% after 1 day of strike action
1999	15%	2%	6.79% after 3 days of strike action
2002	16.4% (\$7500 in 3 steps)	2.5%, 3%, 3%	12.11% over 3 years after 5 days of national strikes and wild cat strikes
2004	10.44% over 3 years	2.5%, 3%, 3%	8.74% over 3 years + \$500 one-off payment. No industrial action
2007	12.49% over 3 years	4%, 4%, 4%	12.49% over 3 years No industrial action
2010	4% for 1 year term	1.5%, 1%	2.93% over 2 years 1 day strike
2013	Two annual increases based on Consumer Price index	2.81% over 3 years	2.8% over 30 months No industrial action
2015	3.7% and two annual increases of 1.7%, 1.7%	2%, 2%, 2%	2%, 2%, 2.7% No industrial action
2018	15% claimed, to restore teacher pay relativity to the average wage as it has been in 2002; 3.47% per year thereafter	3%, 3%, 3%	3.2%, 8.1% (which included a new step at the top of the base scale) 3.5% 1 day strike in conjunction with NZEI members

Table 1 indicates how frequently secondary school teachers have taken industrial action since the late 1980s to get the levels of pay they and their union leaders believed were necessary to recruit and retain teachers. The table does not include all the outcomes of the secondary teachers' collective agreement rounds listed; it is a summary only of the industrial actions taken and the percentage pay increases negotiated. What it does indicate, though, is the nigh continual battle secondary teachers have had to get the rates of pay that they believe might help with recruiting and retaining good quality teachers in our state schools. It is startling to realise that after all the turmoil highlighted in the table, the Ministry of Education does not collect data on the numbers of people applying for initial teacher education places in New Zealand, nor, as a result, does it know what proportion of those who are applying are successful in obtaining places (personal communication, MOE, 12 March 2020). Sahlberg (2011) notes that in Finland not only must all applicants for primary teacher training have a Master's degree but also only about one in 10 applying are accepted. We do not know what the comparable figure is for New Zealand secondary schools, but all the evidence available tells us that our system is much less selective.

Conclusion

I have had leadership roles in five very different New Zealand secondary schools, and some sector-wide leadership roles as well. Each role brought its own challenges, rewards and opportunities to learn. I have had some wonderful colleagues. However, for as long as we fail to provide policies and mechanisms that will ensure that every part of the system thrives as well as it should in a country like ours then we will be letting our teachers, our educational leaders in schools and our students down.

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