

The Current Work of New Zealand Teaching Principals

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ABSTRACT: *The work of teaching principals is a lightly researched aspect of teachers' work in New Zealand. Yet over half of all New Zealand's primary principals are teaching principals. This paper provides a summary of a recent doctoral study into the current work of New Zealand teaching principals.*

Since colonial times small primary schools have remained an important part of New Zealand's educational system. Work as a teaching principal in such small primary schools has been a significant element of the overall career path for New Zealand's primary teachers (Nash, 1980). Sixty percent of all New Zealand primary schools currently have a roll of less than 200 and three quarters of these small schools are located in rural areas (Ministry of Education, 2002). In the self-managing administrative environment that was initiated for all New Zealand schools from 1989 many teaching principals initially struggled with aspects of their new roles and responsibilities (Educational Review Office, 1999). Much of this stress arose from the dual role of teaching principals in small schools and their efforts to try to maintain quality in their teaching while at the same time respond to the new administrative and managerial demands arising from self-management policies and expectations (Livingstone, 1999). Recent research has suggested that the strain of the teaching principal role may also be associated with the physical location of the school – the more distant the school from a main centre the greater the strain (Whittall, 2001).

In the late 1980s England, like New Zealand, experienced administrative reform based on self-managing principles (Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1997). Following some teething problems, small schools in England have generally adapted well to the self-managing environment and are highly regarded by the English equivalent of ERO (Ofsted, 1997). In the late 1990s the work of successful English heads of small schools was studied in depth by Southworth (1999). No such study has yet been undertaken in New Zealand, where small schools generally receive a bad press and the whole future of the network of small schooling has come into question through the network review process (Ministry of Education, 2003).

Following the change of government in New Zealand at the end of 1999, the new Minister of Education, Trevor Mallard, initiated a number of policy changes to deal with perceived problems that had arisen in the first decade of self-management. These changes included an increase in release time for teaching principals, and a 'First Time Principals' training initiative, to better support the work of teachers in small primary schools (Mallard, 2001).

In 2001 I commenced a doctoral study looking at the work of New Zealand teaching principals. In particular I was interested in the impact of Minister Mallard's changes on the general working conditions and attitude to work of teaching principals. To investigate this, in 2002 I replicated a survey of the workload of teaching principals carried out originally by Livingstone in 1999. This survey was sent to all principals of small schools in the Central Districts region of the North Island and was responded to by about 65% of those surveyed. In my study I was also interested in looking in some depth at the professional leadership strategies of successful New Zealand teaching principals and seeing the extent to which these replicated those reported in Southworth's study of successful English teaching heads. To investigate this I interviewed 16 teaching principals from a variety of school sizes and locations. All interviewees had been nominated by local school management advisors as being successful in their current role.

The rest of this research overview summarises the major results from this research. I will summarise the results under three sub-headings those results which were significantly different from earlier studies; those results which were somewhat different from earlier studies; and those results which were similar to earlier studies.

1. Significantly Different Results

In earlier New Zealand studies teaching principals have reported their workload steadily increasing, their degree of stress consequently rising and their turnover and fallout rates also increasing. Principals also reported feeling poorly prepared for the challenges of the role and poorly supported by central agencies once in the role. For example in Livingstone's 1999 survey he found that teaching principals' workloads had rapidly increased over recent times to an average of 64 hours per week, that the main causes of stress were increased paperwork and the pressure from ERO reviews, that 75% reported no or inadequate preparation for the job, and that 40% would leave teaching in the next 12 months if given the opportunity.

In my study I found that teaching principals experienced a high workload in their first year or two on the job (average of 65 hour weeks), and a steady workload thereafter (average 62 hours per week). The principals in my study reported receiving and valuing a wide variety of supports both before and after their appointment as a teaching principal. 62.5% of my survey respondents rated their experience as a teaching principal positively overall and only 17.5% indicated that they would prefer to leave teaching in the next 12 months if given the opportunity.

2. Somewhat Different Results

In his 1999 English study Southworth (1999) found that successful teaching heads all put prime emphasis on their role as school improvers and educational leaders. They put secondary emphasis on their classroom teaching and even lesser emphasis on their administrative role. This priority order was common in all 10 teaching head cases and contexts that Southworth studied in depth. Southworth also found that all the successful English small school heads used three key strategies as educational leaders - they modelled the strategies

they expected others to adopt; they formally monitored the work of others to see that they were doing what was expected; and they informally talked to staff about important professional matters to assist with school improvement initiatives in all classes.

In my study the New Zealand teaching principals I interviewed put emphasis on their role as an educational leader and were striving to bring about school improvement. However the way in which they went about this varied somewhat in different contexts. The principals of 'smaller' small schools (1 and 2 teacher schools) were much more likely than their colleagues in 'larger' small schools (with 4-8 teachers) to play an 'upfront' role in school development, working directly with parents, staff, children or trustees to create the climate, vision, or values that were the foundations for school improvement in their schools. 'Larger' small school principals typically used 'shared' or 'indirect' means, with the principal building capacity amongst other staff to lead aspects of needed programme development, or sharing the leadership role with someone else (e.g., an advisor or other outside expert) during the development work. In addition new small school principals in my study put considerable emphasis on classroom management and teaching. They believed that this was necessary to gain initial credibility with the local community.

3. Similar Findings

Southworth (1999) found that successful English small school heads all shared a similar set of personal qualities which contributed to their influence as educational leaders. All the heads in his study worked hard, showed determination on matters they regarded as important, radiated positiveness, conveyed approachability, and were team builders and team players.

In my study all the successful teaching principals displayed a similar set of personal qualities. They all worked hard, displayed emotional intelligence in their relationships with others, and emphasised teamwork. They took particular care in their selection and support of new teachers, especially the principal release teacher who they viewed as a key team member.

CONCLUSION

Overall, then, this study has found that New Zealand teaching principals of small schools feel rather better supported now than they did in the 1990s and as a result are generally more positive than formerly about their work, despite the fact that most are still working over 60 hours in the average week. While successful New Zealand teaching principals generally adopt similar professional leadership strategies to their English counterparts, New Zealand 'smaller' small school principals put rather more emphasis on 'direct' leadership approaches than do other teaching principals or heads.

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