

## Leadership Clarified

Laurie Thew, March 2003.

This is a summary paper of an extensive research project into school leadership. The contents are drawn from Chapter 9, the conclusion to the study, found in

**Thew, L. (2001) “*Clarifying Leadership: the role of the school principal as an educational leader*”. Unpublished Ed D Thesis Auckland: University of Auckland.**

### **Introduction**

This research project was driven by a desire to clarify and explain the complex world of primary school principals as they undertake their responsibilities as educational leaders and to derive implications and recommendations for leadership practice.

This interest in leadership stemmed from an assumption that educational leadership is important for success in achieving individual, local and national goals for education. However, leadership as a concept is not clearly defined or understood. It has been suggested that part of the reason for this is that educational leadership is commonly viewed from a ‘technical rationalist’ perspective (Ball 1995: 255), which has helped support a New Zealand emphasis on managerialism in school administration. However, this thesis has argued that this approach does not adequately acknowledge the day-to-day reality of school life where demands on principals are sourced from highly complex environments. School settings are also places where expectations are influenced by personalities and humanistic concerns. It has been suggested that this requires principals to at least consider forms of “educative and democratic leadership” (Grace 1995: 59). This results in an extremely difficult educational environment for principals to operate in as effective leaders.

This principalship study has focused on understanding leadership through an examination of how three principals acted as leaders. Through a series of interviews, discussions and subsequent analysis, knowledge was gained as to how these principals came to consider, understand and respond to their day-to-day work.

The aim was to go beyond the superficial, or obvious reasons, why principals acted in particular ways and extract tacit knowledge embedded in “practical consciousness” which can often remain “unexplored in orthodox sociological approaches, especially those associated with objectivism” (Giddens 1984: 281). An important question, used to probe beyond the routine, asked principals to consider how they decided a course of action when they were confronted with seemingly irreconcilable dilemmas. At such times, it is believed, the strategies and results of deliberations reflect the essence of their leadership.

The data, produced from the series of extended interviews with three principals, were supplemented with the use of a comprehensive questionnaire. The questionnaire was generated from the interview responses and given to another eighteen principals. The questionnaire results were used to establish validity and reliability and also added extra background information for consideration.

The analysis of the data has drawn upon Giddens’ structuration theory. An examination of principals’ behaviour as “knowledgeable agents” was used to construct the “frames of meaning” in which they determined their behaviour (Giddens 1984: 284). This process was used to determine not only what principals did, but also why they did what they did. In this fashion it was possible to establish what capacity the principals had to act in certain ways, given that they also had the possibility of acting differently (Giddens 1984: 9).

While the difficulty of separating agency and structure has been acknowledged this detachment was attempted in order to understand the influence of both. Firstly an analysis of contexts was considered important in clarifying principals’ leadership behaviour. The influence of structural properties, which are embedded in context, is evidenced in the reproduction of aspects of society especially in “institutions” (Giddens 1984: 17). In this study the influence of structures (contexts) involving the school, community and national setting was considered. This allowed for an assessment of the breadth of contextual influence on the decision-making and

behaviour of the principals. The effect of context was described as influence working from the outside (context) in (to the principal).

A second consideration was the influence of each principal as a knowledgeable agent. The influence of identity and individual biography were contemplated. These effects were perceived as influence working from the inside out. When the two considerations of agency (principal biography) and structure (context) were considered together it was possible to reach tentative conclusions regarding the important questions underlying this research. These issues are summarised below.

### **Study outcomes**

#### **Educational leadership defined**

That leadership is something more than management was an assumption underlying this research, and the principals involved supported this. However, the clarification of a leadership definition has historically been fraught with difficulty. The principals involved in this research described their leadership in terms of determining a vision, ensuring “ownership” of that vision by the people involved, and ensuring progress towards collective goals determined by the vision. The majority of principals, through interviews and questionnaire responses, described leadership as involving people, and management as involving “things” and processes.

The explanation of leadership, as given by the principals, was seen to have limitations. A good deal of “people work” they described may not be leadership at all but rather personnel management. It seems that organising people in a managerial environment, such as was shown to exist in New Zealand, is similar to organising systems and resources, and these are aspects of management rather than leadership.

It is also possible that there is a disjunction in principals’ minds between what it means to establish an educational vision and the creation of school image. Prior to the introduction of the Tomorrow’s Schools reforms in New Zealand principals were

able to provide professional leadership through the development and pursuit of educational vision (Dale 1992: 12). However, as has been shown, the Tomorrow's Schools reforms process emphasised managerial requirements and de-professionalised school leaders, thus putting principals in a position of having to respond to this new environment. The reforms also redefined schools as stand-alone business units acting autonomously in a new competitive mode (see Thesis Chapter 2). A predictable response to this competitive situation was to shift the focus from educational vision to school image (Dale 1992: 12). However, while the principals in this research were conscious of public perception and the need for their school to be seen as "successful", they attempted to retain a professional rather than a competitive view of their responsibilities. In effect, they were doing what Dale forecast as the most likely means of resolving the image versus vision dilemma, in that they attempted to accept and absorb competitive elements while retaining an overall professional approach to their work (Dale 1992: 14).

This study found that the key principals' understandings of school leadership included an understanding of social justice, and that being a leader involved establishing a personal vision that was justifiable on moral and ethical, as well as political, imperatives. The principals in this study had an appreciation of social justice that was comprehensive including the opportunity for access to resources and the manner in which people were treated. This later point reflected an appreciation of relational justice including the importance of "the formal and informal rules which govern how members of society treat each other both on a macro-level and at a micro interpersonal level" (Gewirtz 2001: 50). Indeed, their leadership seemed to depend very much on personal relationships and team building.

The principals' utilised personal relationships to help gain acceptance of the leader's personal vision as "group vision" and ensure the actions of others met the requirements of the overall vision (Leithwood et al 1999: 170). This did not mean the vision was necessarily imposed but it did mean there was a fundamental belief position that was understood, articulated and promoted by the leader. In essence

the leader decided what was important, to whom it was important, and how important outcomes were best achieved. However, these leadership assumptions appeared to be largely taken for granted and not subject to serious critique.

Principals in the study also had difficulty isolating management from leadership. This was a cause of some anxiety to them because many principals retained a belief that leadership was an important part of their work. Furthermore, this was shown to be a part of their work that provided a good deal of satisfaction (see Thesis Chapter 8). A likely reason for this is that leadership was not adequately theorised in professional development programmes, nor did principals undertake philosophical consideration, or self-reflection, as to what leadership might be or how it should be exercised.

### **Developing personal theories**

How principals construct personal and collective theories that justify educational decisions, like the vision versus image example given above, in a contextual turmoil of conflicting expectations was an important consideration behind this research.

Principals' personal theories about how the world operates and how one should behave in that context appeared to be embedded in personal biography. Personal theories determined what was important and what that meant for how one "lived out one's life". Principals' personal biographies originated from childhood and were a unique blend of contexts and emerging personality. These biographies continually developed through changing circumstance, although core personality traits such as integrity, resolve and self-belief appeared to emerge and persist. These biographies appeared to be the source of principals' belief systems that were the touchstones for decision-making and ultimately determined how the principal operated as agent.

Belief systems appeared to evolve through personal and career experience, personal networking, and through personal reflection. These beliefs both forced and enabled principals to reconcile what they believed should be done in any given situation with contextual expectations of what needed to be done. When there was

a mismatch between individual belief and institutional expectation a pragmatic solution was usually found that met contextual requirements while retaining individual integrity. At times of serious tension between the individual and context it was the individual's belief system that enabled an interpretive conception of context that separated fact from value and distinguished between reality and ideal, or between "what is and what ought to be" (Seddon 1994: 43).

Principals thus appeared to make educational decisions based on what is particularly important to them individually, although collective understandings did play a part in decision-making. Furthermore, these basic beliefs appeared to be axiomatic in that they were largely taken for granted and uncritically accepted as the "way things are".

### **Learning to act in the midst of uncertainty: utilising the logic of appropriateness**

How principals decide what to do when they don't know what to do is an important question. What happens when structure (context) does not provide, or allow for the comfortable acceptance of a personally preferable solution? At this time principals appear to be faced with an irreducible minimum of personal as well as professional discretion. They are confronted with an immediate problem, with no obvious solution, with no helpful assistance but an absolute requirement to do something.

At the simplest level principals could respond by reverting to role. That is, they could act as a principal is expected to act while "on duty" in that position. However, as this study has shown, role is more than status and cannot be divorced from the personal belief system of the individual. Furthermore, a principal's role enactment predominantly occurs through a cycle of face-to-face social situations with a "relevant audience of role others" (Goffman 1961b: 85). This emphasis on people's often-conflicting expectations means that principals operated in an environment of continual uncertainty and potential disruption.

The principals in this study had relatively clear problem-solving strategies for operating in such instances. An initial step was to gather relevant information and canvass a number of possible options. This approach was essentially managerial, rational, and provided an ethically neutral perspective from which to make judgements concerning the desirability and advisability of various courses of action (Goffman 1970: 86).

A second step was to take advice from personal and professional networks. This enabled the problem, the information, and the possible outcomes to be presented to others for their consideration. This also provided a contribution from systemic expectations and normative considerations (Goffman 1970: 95). This ensured a wider range of input into both understanding the problem and potential solutions.

A third step was for principals to apply their personal views to possible outcomes. Through a process of “symbolic interaction”, principals attempted to put themselves in the “shoes of those affected” and to see things, at least temporarily, from their point of view (Goffman 1970:136). Principals then considered the effect of possible alternatives according to their own value-based assessment of outside expectations and their internal belief systems. In this way, localised factors, geographic, cultural and personal were incorporated. Thus, principals utilised the **logic of local appropriateness**, rather than the logic of universal rationality, to enable mediation between conflicting demands and expectations. This allowed them to create and recreate an individualised, unique worldview. This constructivist perspective then provided an environment in which a pragmatic decision was justified.

### **Leadership, power and control: strategic contextual transformation**

Power has been defined as “the capacity to achieve desired and intended outcomes” (Giddens 1984: 15). The ability to exercise power is to seemingly possess control. Empirically power and control are embedded in each other but “analytically they are distinguishable and operate at different levels of analysis” (Bernstein 1996: 5). Bernstein continued:

“Power relations, in this perspective, create boundaries, legitimise boundaries, reproduce boundaries, between different categories of groups, gender, class, race, different categories of discourse, different categories of agents. Thus, power always operates to produce dislocations, to produce punctuations in social space.

From this point of view, then, power always operates on the relations *between* categories. The focus of power from this point of view is on the relation *between* and, in this way power establishes legitimate relations of order. Control on the other hand, from this point of view, establishes legitimate forms of communication appropriate to different categories. Control carries the boundary relations of power and socialises individuals into these relationships. We shall see however that control is double faced for it carries both the power of reproduction and the potential for its change.”

(Bernstein 1996: 5, emphasis in original)

This explanation is helpful for explaining the work of principals. The external power that principals exercised in this project was located in the structural hierarchy of schooling. It was positional power that was inherited on appointment and which could ultimately enforce decisions. However, the scope for use of this power was formally confined in the conditions of their appointment, which meant there was a formal line of accountability for its use to external rather than internal groups. The exercise of power in this fashion was evidenced by the principal subject who, when staff discussions were concluded, made a unilateral decision to proceed in a certain way. This principal was legitimately utilising the power of her position that was evidenced in the differentiated positional status between her and other staff members. It is this formal positional authority that enables principals to define and police operating boundaries and to be “seen as very powerful figures inside the schools they lead” (Southworth 1997: 54).

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

the development of school policy and the acceptance of legally mandated requirements. Secondly, they acted as impression managers when they altered understandings in the minds of their staff and community. This creation of selective interpretation of meaning has been defined in this study as **strategic contextual transformation**. This is an encompassing description of the way principals selectively combined language content, presentation style and role expectation to create specific understandings in the minds of others. This emerged as an important aspect of principals' leadership. Principals engaged with people through dialogue, by presenting a particular image and by setting particular examples. Other peoples' assumptions were thus questioned, information manipulated and impressions developed in an ongoing process of social interaction that created particular meaning in the minds of the participants. This interplay of impression and expression is an example of symbolic behaviour (Goffman 1959: 2), and appears to be at the heart of leadership activity. Slater summed up this idea of strategic contextual transformation when he wrote:

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

(Slater 1995: 465)

This explanation of leadership considers power to be largely structural and embedded in context and consequently external to principals. Control is seen as a subjective phenomenon, exercised as much through symbolism and ritual as through rational analysis. This helps to explain why it is possible for some principals to have power but seem to lack control. It also clarifies why people that are not in positions of power may exercise influence and have control beyond the status of their position.

### **Leadership defined**

When Bernstein's description of the relationship between power and control was considered alongside the concept of strategic contextual transformation, as illustrated by the principals in this study, a particular explanation of leadership appeared to emerge. If one assumes that Bernstein's theory is sound then power creates social space by setting accepted boundaries and establishing accepted relationships of order. These relationships, in turn, define problems and codify expectations, possible resources and views of alternative solutions. In short, power creates space in which acceptable ways of "seeing" reside. In this study, principals were provided with expectations and resources that were largely managerial because they fitted within a defined space resulting from a nationally prescribed power base and codified expectations. The principals appeared to act in a managerial sense when they responded within the codified space that is the established world of principalship. Even when these principals were introducing change they were sometimes altering local policy within pre-determined larger parameters. At such times flexibility was limited, as the logic of rationality held sway over the logic of appropriateness to accommodate generalised externally imposed requirements. Consequently principals were, at such times, acting as managers, as exemplified by the term "managing change". This was different from having the opportunity, and the flexibility, to initiate change.

On the other hand, as Bernstein points out, control "carries *both* the power of reproduction *and* the potential for its change" (Bernstein 1996: 5 emphasis added). Control establishes what is acceptable space through a process of boundary legitimation and socialisation of individuals. Thus control allows individuals opportunities for influence over and above the power relationship that determines social space.

This means that **control has the potential to alter as well as reinforce power relationships, and it is in this regard that leadership becomes distinguishable from management.** It seems that leadership appears in the exercising of control to

reconfigure social space, while management is the exercise of control within space that reinforces existing boundaries. The principals in this study were displaying leadership when they altered perceptions to create new boundaries between what was rational and what was appropriate. As has been mentioned, there were times when there was a mismatch between principals' codified expectations and principals' personal beliefs. At such times, principals utilised control to adjust the boundary between rationality and appropriateness. These principals were then acting as leaders by extending the logic of appropriateness and reducing a reliance on rationality by reinterpreting and redefining the accepted view of "how things are". This was described above as strategic contextual transformation. Leadership was thus the utilisation of uncoded expectations and resources that resulted in a modification of context that in turn provided a new realisation of "how things might be".

In summary, management is the utilisation of codified expectations, resources and modes of operating within established boundaries of rational acceptability. Leadership is the exercise of control that enables a move, outside codified understandings, that results in a shift in the boundaries of power. This shift alters perceptions and presents new appropriate ways of thinking and behaving. In this fashion, leaders take uncoded expectations, resources and ways of operating, and define these as suitable, even necessary. Consequently, **leadership can be described as the process of defining, rather than accommodating, the rules of appropriateness as to what is acceptable or what is desirable.**

### **Implications for practice**

Two desired outcomes of this study are the addition of a school perspective to the body of knowledge on educational leadership and a useful contribution to improved leadership in schools.

Given the findings of this study, the major implication for practice appears to revolve around principals' professional development. In New Zealand, pre-service and in-

service professional development for principals is limited in availability and content. A reason for this is the isolation of schools and the emphasis on managerialism that followed the introduction of the Tomorrow's Schools reforms in the late 1980s. These changes placed decisions for the development of potential and incumbent principals in the hands of the individual concerned and/or Boards of Trustees.

This study showed that pre-service principalship development was limited. School experiences in positions such as senior teacher, deputy principal or acting principal were the most common developmental experiences. Study programmes were usually the prerogative of individuals. Given the nature of their responsibilities it is not surprising that Boards of Trustees took an incidental, almost non-existent approach to principal succession training. Questionnaire results supported the interview material. Eight of the eighteen principals considered they were not well prepared or totally unprepared for principalship prior to appointment. Only three questionnaire respondents considered they were well, or very well, prepared. These figures are cause for concern and indicate the need for a pre-appointment principalship qualification programme. The introduction of such a requirement would also give assistance to Boards of Trustees who have the responsibility for principal appointments. Given the lack of a pre-requisite qualification, the appointment of first-time principals especially must be a difficult, even daunting task for Boards of Trustees.

The development of principals once appointed is also necessary. Results from this study show that in-service development was haphazard and dependent on the interest of individual principals and their employing Boards of Trustees. It appeared that principals appreciated the need for training but this tended to focus on managerial effectiveness especially at the time of initial appointment. Principals also tended to rely on informal networks of fellow principals to whom they turned in time of need. Unfortunately, this reflects the lack of a nationally co-ordinated programme of principal development that is on-going, supported by incentives and comprehensive in content.

It is acknowledged that, at the time of writing, the New Zealand Ministry of Education was working with interest groups to develop a national programme to assist the professional development of newly appointed principals. It was planned to involve 50 principals in 2002, although this number was expected to rise to 520 by 2005 (Nichols 2001: 2). It is recommended that this initiative be expanded with some urgency to include all principals.

One outcome of the Tomorrow's Schools reforms has been the increased isolation of principals. The principals in this study did not appear to act collectively to any large degree. Networks were important and these appeared to operate one to one, in small mentoring groups or larger Associations. While networking was significant for information sharing and morale support, it seemed unlikely that leadership growth was a major focus or outcome. However, it was clear that a desire to be transformative leaders was common to all three principals in this study. They attempted to retain a sense of professional commitment to the learners in their schools and the staff they worked with. However, an on-going professional development programme would provide much needed support and cohesiveness to what is currently somewhat fragmented school leadership.

### **Towards a national programme of school leadership**

Formal training for school leadership may be rare in New Zealand but programmes have been long established in the United States and have attracted much attention in England since the 1960s and 1970s (Brundrett 2001: 229). The development of programmes in England has outlined a range of components to be considered, including university-based qualifications, mentoring programmes, management courses and specialised school training. English programmes also illustrate a number of pitfalls to be avoided. School leadership programmes need to develop in partnership between state regulatory authorities, higher educational institutions and schools (Brundrett 2001: 240). This should develop a pathway for professional development that avoids issues that have bedevilled programmes in England,

including the difficulty of distinguishing between leadership and management, the emphasis on business practice and the lack of cohesion between a centrally controlled qualification, and specialist university degrees (Brundrett 2001: 239). Rather than be sources of conflict, such topics should be the catalyst for leadership debate among principals themselves.

This study has clarified potential course content from a New Zealand perspective. Leadership is not clearly defined among principals. Management demands an increasing share of time and principals seem to have less time to reflect on day-to-day issues let alone ponder what leadership might be. These issues need to be addressed. Principals engaged in this study recognised the importance of educational leadership and appreciate the importance of the task, which supports Roz Palmer's finding that educational leaders, rather than school managers, are necessary in New Zealand schools (Palmer 1997: 165).

Principals involved in this research gave an insight into a job that has personally become increasingly isolating, and at times lonely. They expressed concern at their lack of involvement in national issues, the dearth of genuine consultation with authorities, and the complex interface between state and school that seemed to culminate at their door. Interestingly, while questionnaire respondents generally felt New Zealand schools were well led (14 positives from 18), only three from eighteen believed that the New Zealand education system was well led. However, while these principals had clear views as to what they believed leadership may be, it appeared management issues dominated school life and limited both an understanding of what leadership is, or might be, and the time to exercise it.

## **Recommendations regarding principals leadership development in New Zealand**

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

what it means to be a leader should lead to improved performance, not the other way round. While principals in this study acknowledged the importance of a strong philosophy they did not appear to have the opportunity to be philosophical.

- Principals' professional development programmes should be supported with funding, a recommended time allocation and salary incentives. Professional development incentives for principals currently appear to be piecemeal, and in the case of principals' remuneration, woefully inadequate. Interestingly, of the eighteen randomly chosen questionnaire respondents, four were university graduates with a Bachelor degree or equivalent, and two more had post-graduate qualifications.

### **Implications for further research**

This study has emphasised the importance of personal identity and individual biography in leadership behaviour. There appears to be a complex interplay between context and personal identity that determines leadership behaviour. However, just what identity is, and to what extent individual identity moderates the influences of context remains unclear. Research is required to further determine the implications for leadership in this regard. This study has provided three methods whereby this might be done, including semi-structured in-depth interviewing, the construction of principal profiles, and the use of a comprehensive questionnaire for principals. While the questionnaire in particular contributed a relatively small part to this study, it could be used by other researchers to both validate claims from this study and extend an investigation along the lines suggested above.

This study has responded to a need for educational leadership research to be grounded in actual practice. It has clarified the school leadership of three principals who all exhibited strong belief systems and the determination to follow their educational vision on behalf of other people. This reflects other findings that successful principals have a will to succeed and strong commitment to their cause

(Woods et al 1997: 118). However, leadership style has not been examined except in passing, and many questions remain. Should leaders be ideally democratic, moral and individually empowering? Should leaders be autocratic, entrepreneurial and culturally directive? Is there a middle path and who should decide a path anyway? More school-based, grounded theory research would be valuable to help determine what particular style of educational leadership is desirable and/or effective.

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

### **The final word**

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

This study was motivated by a question which asked how principals managed a complex environment where expectations on their position appear to clash with their personal beliefs about education in general, and schooling in particular. Essentially the researcher wanted to understand how principals know what to do when confronted with seemingly irresolvable dilemmas for, in spite of the complexity of their situation and the need for reflection and understanding, principalship is in

essence a practical occupation. Debate may be necessary and interesting but principals fundamentally need to know how to choose what to do tomorrow.

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

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Correspondence regarding the contents of this summary paper, or the thesis itself, is  
welcome by the author who can be contacted at: [l.thew@xtra.co.nz](mailto:l.thew@xtra.co.nz)

