



Auckland Primary  
Principals Association



**ASB**

**Sustaining Success**  
**as**  
**Principals with Long Tenure**

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*2011*

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Through this Fellowship I have been afforded the opportunity to visit schools and speak to colleagues, in international settings, on a topic that is of great interest to me. I have also had time to reflect, evaluate and plan ahead. I am extremely grateful to all involved in making this opportunity a most rewarding experience.

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## **Background:**

*“As well as being pedagogical leaders, principals are responsible for the day-to-day management of a broad range of policy and operational matters, including personnel, finance, health and safety and the interpretation and delivery of the national curriculum”*

Kiwi Leadership for Principals 2008

The role of a principal is challenging, exciting, rewarding and constantly changing. As I approached 10 years in my current position, I was challenged, through my appraisal, to reflect on my success in my position, to identify strategies that had proved successful and to also envision the strategic development of our school and my leadership over the coming years. This led me on a journey entitled “Sustaining Success as Principals’ with Long Tenure” Initially I commenced a rather ad hoc personal informal research project speaking with colleagues and asking them questions as to how they planned for continued success in their schools, and also what strategies they intentionally employed to ensure their own on-going success in their positions. My research parameters were somewhat loose; I had a few questions to which I was seeking answers, and had envisaged that I would gather information to lead me to design a future personal professional development path. Not surprisingly I discovered that the more colleagues I spoke to, the more I wanted to know and hence my application for the ASB/APPA Award.

The application process enabled me to organise both my thinking and the informal information I had gathered into a more formal structure. My initial steps concerned researching the concept surrounding sustaining success as long tenured principals. I found the research available to be varied, often focussing on change management, school improvement and the ability to sustain significant change.

My research proposal developed into a professional development project centred around identifying theories/principles pertaining to leading and developing staff in order to maintain and progress school wide success. I felt fairly confident in my knowledge of practices in both New Zealand and Australia, as I have worked my whole career in New

Zealand and have participated in many professional development opportunities in Australia.

As such I planned to visit England, Ireland and the USA; to visit colleagues in similar positions and to discuss their planned/informal strategic intentions for sustaining their schools success.

My research methodology is based upon qualitative research principles, focusing on descriptive research. I planned to interview Principals who have engaged in formal qualification study during their tenure as Principal. This framework is planned simply to enable me to establish commonality within my research parameters.

Research questions were designed to promote discussion and ensure some level of consistency in the gathering of evidence.

My proposed questions were formulated as conversation starters. I assumed (rightly as it transpired) that in most cases some rather than all questions would be answered.

### **Proposed Questions:**

#### **Question 1 Professional Experiences**

- How long have you been a Principal?
- How many schools have you led as Principal?
- What is/was the school size?
- Urban/rural school?
- What formal qualification study have you engaged in?
- When did you complete this study?

#### **Question 2 Theory**

- Have you identified any specific theory that underpins your leadership practice?
- How did you identify/develop your theory?
- What research/professional development have you engaged in extend your theoretical knowledge?
- How has this research/ PD impacted upon your practice?
- How has your knowledge affected staff culture?

#### **Question 3 Practice**

- How did you go about initial implementation of your theory into practice in your school (was it planned or ad hoc!)?
- Who was involved/ what was their level of prior knowledge?
- What was the initial impact of your practice?
- What did you learn?
- What do you think your staff learned?

**Question 4 Sustainability**

- Did you plan for sustainable practice?
- How did you plan for sustainability of practice?
- Who was involved?
- Has your initial commitment to your theory changed..how/why?
- What has evolved over time?

**Question 5 Continued Capability**

- What strategies are in place to promote continued capability?
- How do you envisage these strategies progressing should you take leave from your position?
- With regards to our conversation; of what are you most proud?

I am indebted to the many colleagues who assisted me in seeking out principals whose experience fit with my criteria. Much time was committed to organising meetings, social events and professional readings. For this I am ever grateful.

## **THE STUDY:**

The aim of this research project was to visit principals in their own schools, to engage in lively discussion pertaining to their sustaining their school success over their long tenure.

A questionnaire had been formulated (see appendix) as a guide for discussion and also to enable the collection of relatively standardised or at least comparable information.

The study parameters were designed to enable me to visit principals in four distinctly different education settings and systems. I was fortunate enough to be welcomed into schools in New Zealand, England (specifically London), Ireland and the United States of America (specifically, New York).

I am eternally grateful to the following people who assisted me in identifying schools and contacting principals.

- Teachers who have returned to Dominion Road School, or other New Zealand schools, after their Overseas Experience (OE), and who recommended schools in London, where they had in fact taught.
- Staff members at the Faculty of Education, University of Auckland, for recommending international colleagues.
- Family members who approached their childrens' schools and arranged for me to spend time at the school and meet with their principals.
- Daria Rigney: Community School Superintendent, District 2, New York City, New York State, who contacted schools on my behalf.

On average I spent half a day in each school. I planned to visit primary (or the equivalent) schools, and aimed to gather data from differing contexts, i.e. urban/rural, large/small, high/low decile schools. Amazingly enough I managed to achieve that particular objective! I was and still am humbled by the efforts expended by colleagues, in

welcoming me and ensuring that I was given every opportunity to talk, observe and interact in their school communities.

### SCHOOL CONTEXTS

SETTINGS	COUNTRY			
	England (London)	Ireland	USA (New York)	New Zealand
Urban	✓✓✓✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓✓
Rural		✓✓✓✓		
Large Size (500 +1)	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓
Medium Size (300 – 500)	✓✓			✓✓
Small Size (0-300)		✓✓✓✓		
Low Decile (1-3)	✓✓✓		✓	✓
Mid Decile (4-6)		✓✓✓✓✓	✓	✓
High Decile (7-10)	✓✓			✓

## Literature Review:

*“Sustainable leadership matters, spreads and lasts. It is a shared responsibility, that does not unduly deplete human or financial resources, and that cares for and avoids exerting negative damage on the surrounding educational and community environment. Sustainable leadership has an activist engagement with the forces that affect it, and builds an educational environment of organizational diversity that promotes cross-fertilization of good ideas and successful practices in communities of shared learning and development.”*

(Hargreaves and Fink, 2003 p.3)

There is a plethora of research available pertaining to leadership, successful leadership and sustaining leadership. The combination of these three principles (sustaining successful leadership), is, as yet, rather less defined. Thus the quote above mentioned is included as the definition used in this research study, to define sustainable leadership; to identify the concept as being more than the ability to manage change or implement reform. (Hargreaves and Fink, 2003).

This study seeks to identify strategies for success implemented by principals with 10 or more years tenure in their current school. It delves into their experiences, their context and the conditions, systems and structures they have implemented over time to maintain and progress the success of their schools in a 21<sup>st</sup> century educational environment.

Internationally, primary school principals’ experiences are the same, different and definitely varied. “The distinct context of each school means principals need to have the kinds of leadership skills and understandings that will help them to maintain the best possible conditions for teaching, learning and building community confidence” (Kiwi Leadership For Principals, 2008 p.8). Principals key objectives include being able to formulate a vision, develop a cohesive culture, establish effective channels of

communication, implement professional development in a manner that improves teaching and learning, and guide and direct instructional improvement. (School Leadership and Student Outcomes; Identifying What Works and Why. Best Evidence Synthesis 2009). In New Zealand our context is differentiated, and indeed devolved, through the Self-Managing Schools policy. In other OECD countries, principals are not mandated to “work as chief executives of their boards of trustees to support the development of policy, then take responsibility for carrying policy into practice. This includes setting the direction for the school in ways that reflect the needs of the local community.” (Kiwi Leadership For Principals, 2008 p.14).

While there are many characteristics that have been defined as indicators of successful school leadership, there are several that may be attributed to being critical to the on-going success of 21<sup>st</sup> century schools. These include:

1. **Vision:** The ability to articulate a clear statement of goals, principles and expectations.
2. **Leadership:** The ability to develop and add continual improvement to the organisation. The ability to create and sustain conditions for change. The ability to prepare students for an uncertain future.
3. **High Academic Standards:** The ability to ensure that administrative decisions are informed by knowledge about effective pedagogy
4. **Standards of the Heart:** The ability to deliberately advocate emotional intelligence: to build competency and capacity through creating a positive school climate.
5. **Family, School and Community Partnerships:** Recognise that parents are a child’s first and most influential teachers. Work with families on home-school partnerships to ensure that all students are welcome at school, and that their learning needs, and cultural and ethnic considerations are addressed.
6. **Professional Development:** Provide opportunities for staff to engage in learning that increases their content knowledge and pedagogy; that is consistent over time, is research-based, culturally relevant and connected to their personal professional practice.
7. **Evidence of Success:** The ability to gather evidence based data, to analyse data and use findings to facilitate decision making processes that lead to the improvement of teaching and learning outcomes. The ability to increase social, intellectual, organisational and human capital. The ability to use entrepreneurial skills.

(Kiwi Leadership For Principals 2008), (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 2011). *Characteristics of Successful Schools*.

There is further research to support that the development and sustaining of school culture can be identified as an indicator of school success. In this study school culture is defined as “the way we do things here” (Barth 1990). It can be interpreted as commonality of shared beliefs, priorities, values and inclusivity. In the day-to-day context of running a school the definition implies that principals work consistently to build relational trust, to be responsive to leadership challenges and to engage in critical self-reflection. In our New Zealand context the Treaty of Waitangi “provides a rationale for building a school culture” and enables schools to establish a “connection between the culture of the community and whanau and the values of the school” (Kiwi Leadership For Principals, 2008 p.19).

Another significant aspect documented in international publications recognises the value of principals’ personal professional learning. The notions of critical self-reflection, responsive leadership and personal resiliency are explored as relevant factors in achieving sustainable success. Critical self-reflection can be identified as the initial leadership choice; the first decision of a leader is to become a leader. When an individual recognises that “they want to provide others with vision, to direct the course of future events and inspire others to success” (Heathfield, 2008), they recognise the need for the development of their personal professional development plan. Whether this be through formal academic study, or through a more informal channel, leaders usually choose to investigate the development of their competency, capacity and personal dispositions. Sustaining success as a concept outlines and identifies parameters for the implementation of their conceptualised personal development plan and the gathering of evidence to support success over time.

Theoretical notions relating to personal professional development would not be complete without reference to being made to the construct of self-efficacy

The questionnaire designed to inform this study, takes into account the success factors articulated in this literature review, and aims to gather evidence of sustaining successful school leadership through professional discussion.

## **ENGLAND:**

### CONTEXT:

My first impression of schools in London was the difficulty I experienced in finding principals of long tenure. I initially contacted the Office For Standards In Education OFSTED, who replied that they were unable to assist me. With the aide of friends, colleagues and family, I was led to five principals, all in Central London, who were happy to meet with me. Their experience varied from 11-19 years in their current schools. After gaining entry through an almost impenetrable security system, I had the absolute pleasure of interacting with a wide range of primary school communities. The initial impression gained from all schools concerned the influence of the political context on teaching and learning programmes. All principals spoke about the demands to meet criteria set by the local authority, and to provide on-going and always changing evidence of having met this criteria. Criteria had been set by both national and local management authorities around 1997, and while being updated, it was felt that the introduction of a new national curriculum would redefine current objectives. Principals were ruthlessly focussed on teaching and learning programmes, with gathering and analysing data and future planning, being at the forefront of their practice.

### THEORY/PRACTICE:

Several principals commented that they had planned for a specific focus on maintaining school culture; that the impact of a less than positive (OFSTED) report could denigrate a school, and thus the culture had to be constantly managed and affirmed.

Several principals felt that through their positive OFSTED reports, they had gained a certain level of autonomy for the local office, and as such had the opportunity to develop their own curriculum within the parameters of the national criteria. My observation

identified an enthusiastic commitment to music and the arts, with more than one school offering specific programmes and employing specialists to deliver these programmes.

Most of the principals I interviewed had engaged in some level of postgraduate university study, with one or two taking on mentoring roles through the National College for School Leadership (NCSL).

All principals commented on their commitment to sustaining good practice in their schools. After discussion with all of them, a general trend emerged, based on the evolving nature of the success of their schools over time. The formal study they engaged in provided them with foundation theory on which to base their practice. They all identified themselves as selective readers, and selective attenders of professional development opportunities. When asked to nominate their primary source for professional development **all** principals responded that they had formed connections with like-minded colleagues, and that these formal/informal meetings were imperative to their professional sustainability.

Principals identified the importance of building capacity as a foundation for continued success; distributed leadership, shared vision and capability for future direction as being vital to achieving success. One commented on the importance of recognising that school culture evolves as staff are appointed, leave or are internally promoted. That person stressed that as professionals we are charged to accept that school does not operate at 100% for 100% of the time. They cited one of their most important learning experiences occurring after two members of the senior management team left the school and there was no-one to fill the gaps that were created after they had gone. As such, continued success required them to develop and act upon their capacity to re-build a team and to keep evolving the notion of best practice teaching and learning programmes

#### CONTINUED CAPACITY:

When asked a question on how they planned for sustaining success as a long tenured principal, each of my colleagues smiled widely. In varying sentence structure they all shared their pride in the achievement of their students, and the enthusiastic commitment of their staff. I heard that commonly cited New Zealand quote ‘the child is the heart of the matter’! They all held a shared belief that it is imperative not to lose focus on what

really matters, with a particular reference to developing the ability to not succumb to each and every new education trend.

In summary, they articulated that their school culture informed an openness for sharing and commitment to their school vision, they continually strive to provide the very best teaching and learning programmes for students, to be strong enough to recognise and celebrate when all is going well, and also to take affirmative action when it is needed.

And lastly, their recognition of the importance of like-minded colleagues. Each had experienced support and collegiality at varying times in their careers and were committed to the on-going professional development of their collegial group.



Saint Monica's School, Hackney, East London

## **IRELAND:**

### CONTEXT:

My travels led me to the West of Ireland, and it was here that I visited with five colleagues. Their experience ranged from 11-28 years tenure in their current schools, and upon conversing with them, it became apparent that the situation in the west of Ireland was quite the opposite to my London experience. Many principals had been employed in the same school for rather a long tenure; when I questioned further, as to why they had stayed, I was given a range of responses based upon enjoyment, geographical placement and employment opportunities.

Principals all seemed concerned with recent Pisa and OECD results where it had been identified that Irish students results in mathematics and English had dropped. A new curriculum had been introduced in 2007 and despite many professional development days, the expected students improvement scores had not been realised. Thus a complete review of numeracy and literacy had been completed and time allocations for curriculum areas were being revised. Principals were in the process of attending new professional in-service opportunities at their local education centres. There was concern expressed that education advisors positions had been dis-established, and that there would be few people with the professional knowledge and competence to deliver new professional development to staff. The local education centre was also mandated to conduct Whole School Evaluations (WSE). Schools would get three weeks notice of as WSE, and a full report would be available via the internet. There seemed to be a level of consternation that the union had agreed to incidental visits, termed a Mini WSE. In summary, theirs was a changing landscape, with little evidence obviously available to indicate future direction

### THEORY/PRACTICE:

All of the principals I interviewed commented that they had been appointed to their positions without any formal training, although there is now formal training available. All had since become members of the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN), and regarded their annual conference in January as a valuable professional learning opportunity. Two colleagues had engaged in formal academic study, and were both very positive about the research opportunities provided as part of pursuing a formal qualification.

When asked about their intentional strategic endeavours to ensure sustaining success, several colleagues noted the effects of the current recession. With cutbacks, teachers were being asked to work more hours while taking a pay cut. Therefore, the previous nature of building and sustaining success as principals of long tenure, had diversified to address the response from staff to the cutbacks.

*(It is important to I note that the impact of the recession was obvious throughout Ireland. Unemployment and lack of disposable income were common and often spoken about issues.)*

Principals commented that the nature of their school culture had not changed; staff remained committed to their schools vision, and worked diligently to provide effective teaching and learning programmes. One principal spoke at length regarding the importance of their staff collegiality. They felt that they had intentionally worked to provide an environment where communication and collaboration were valued, and as such all staff were respected as stakeholders. They felt that their committed implementation of this practice, had enabled staff to increase their pedagogical knowledge and thus their professional capability. Evidence of success was noted with the consistent improvement of student achievement scores and the consistently positive comments made by parents.

#### CONTINUED CAPACITY:

All principals had planned for sustaining their success. For most their plans had evolved over time and were refined/redefined each year. For all principals the current economic environment was exercising a significant impact in their school communities. Each school had families who had left as employment ceased and families moved nearer to either work or grandparents. Immigrant families had been given work permits, and there was an increase in students for whom English is a second/other language.

However, all principals remained committed to progressing their schools; to providing specific teaching and learning programmes based on evidential data and designed to accelerate learning. They all noted that while their current environment was a concern, their responsibility was, as ever, to their students.

Several principals commented on the importance of their area network. Professional development was provided at the local education office, thus enabling them to connect with colleagues. Two noted that they looked forward to these events, as they were able to seek information/affirmation for current requirements.



Dorus Community School, Kinvara, County Galway, Ireland  
(Note the weather!)

## **USA; NEW YORK:**

### CONTEXT:

“In 2007, principals signed a landmark performance agreement with the City, winning increased autonomy to run their schools in exchange for increased responsibility for the outcomes of their students. With this agreement, the educators who know best what each student needs to succeed got the authority and the resources to make the best decisions for the students in their schools. In return, they agreed to be judged on the results they deliver: the academic progress of their students.

The Department of Education (DOE) develops and manages evaluation tools to hold schools accountable for student achievement, and provides data, tools, and resources that educators and families use to improve schools and support student learning.” (New York City Department of Education 2010).

And so for the approximately 1700 schools in New York City, results are available on a spreadsheet on the department’s website. Information includes results pertaining to; student performance, progress and school environment. The Principals I spoke to had been in their current environment form 22-28 years. They spoke at length about the changes they had been participants in over time, and how the agreement signed in 2007 had changed to road map for education in New York. If schools were successful, they were left to continue, however if results were not as expected or improvement was not identified as being accelerated, then the Department had the right to remove the principal from the school. They were able to quote their results in terms of city wide percentages i.e. our school is in the top 2% in reading, as well as giving examples as to where they placed in terms of the number of schools in their area

### THEORY/PRACTICE:

Principals had been involved in post graduate study, and spoke of the importance and relevance of this professional development. One principal had been invited to attend a course of study for high performing principals, and cited that as being a turning point in their career. Much enthusiasm was shared when relating the course content and it's practical application to their school context. The opportunity to view leadership through different lenses and to be afforded the opportunity to engage in rigorous professional discussion with colleagues had motivated this principal to actively pursue their commitment to lifelong learning. Indeed many aspects of our conversation included shared opinions of pedagogical debate held by this group of principals who still operate as an informal network. Upon further questioning, it became clear that this same university cohort met once per month to discuss relevant professional issues, and also visited each others schools on a semi-formal basis where an agreed area of interest would be presented for observation and interaction. Over the years this group of like minded colleagues had become ardent supporters of each other, they had developed a mutual respect that enabled them to communicate in an open and honest manner. The principal I spoke to regarded this group as imperative to their personal professional development, to their on-going daily practice and thus the success of their school.

Professional development debate proved to be a current issue in New York. It seemed to be that over the years the professional development opportunities offered by the Department had somewhat diminished, leaving schools to search for their own providers. One school employed an Australian facilitator who worked for 60 days per year in their school. This facilitator initially worked with the principal who had (through data analysis) identified the schools strategic goals. Together they sourced professional reading and formulated a plan for staff engagement. The facilitator then led staff and team meetings, modelled for teachers, contributed to the writing of their education plans and worked with teachers on the development of their individual teaching goals. This facilitator had been working in the school for 14 years!

CONTINUED CAPACITY:

Principals demonstrated enthusiasm toward their roles. Over the years all had come to accept that the New York City political context would provide strategic indicators for schools success, and that as principals they needed to develop and implement the resources to achieve that success. They regarded themselves as the CEO of the school, and over time had become more and more appreciative of their autonomy. Professional development was identified as an indicator for continuing success. Teacher release days were provided by the Department and while in most cases, schools were required to seek their own providers, there was a plan in place to ensure that this happened. Professional development plans evolved as a result of data analysis and all staff were given the opportunity to contribute to school wide professional plans.

Principals greatly valued input from their parent communities. In one case the principal spoke the local language of the community and had found this skill to be most useful! Much time had been committed to communicating the schools education philosophy to the community and seeking parent buy-in. Many families were very keen for the arts to be promoted and one school had undertaken a massive fundraising drive to provide individual/small group tuition to each child over the year. The principal commented that as this fundraising had been a true parent/school partnership, their absentee rate had significantly decreased.

When asked to summarise their strategies for sustaining success, principals cited their ability to call upon their current experience when problem solving. They talked warmly regarding relationships they had established with their communities and the mutual respect that had evolved over the years. And also their commitment to their profession; the opportunities (both formal and informal) to support new principals, the opportunity to present at university courses, conferences and seminars, their participation in professional development of their choosing as well as the collegial networks that had been established over the years.

Interesting to note that as I was about to leave, one principal commented that as far as being successful they felt that they were totally committed to the concepts of trust and transparency; they had no underlying agenda and were there to do their utmost for the children in their school.



The De Soto School, Chinatown, Manhattan, New York City.

## **NEW ZEALAND:**

### **CONTEXT:**

Kiwi Leadership for Principals provided initial reading, when researching the context for New Zealand Schools. The document's focus on the practice of principalship proved both suitable and relevant information when designing the parameters of my research questionnaire. While there is a plethora of information available detailing the qualities and skills necessary to succeed in principalship, Kiwi Leadership provided a relevant context for me, and my colleagues. The identification of Areas of Practice, as well as Personal Qualities needed for successful leadership, set the scene for current practice and future development.

Drawing from my own experience as well as those colleagues who were formally interviewed and informally canvassed, it can be stated that the impact of the political context is far less than in some other international contexts. Our Self Managing Schools policy provides principals with a level of autonomy that is perhaps envied by some of our international colleagues. It is also a philosophy that is very much valued by New Zealand principals. Colleagues I spoke to all recognised as imperative, the importance of being able to lead their schools as an active member of the schools community; to be able to work in partnership with the community to “set the direction and align resources with the schools goals and targets, which are expected to reflect national priorities” (Kiwi Leadership For Principals, 2008 p.10).

Principals interviewed had been employed in their current schools for between 10-17 years.

### **THEORY/PRACTICE:**

Principals interviewed for this study were all acutely aware of their tenure. They were able to enunciate many examples of success and development over their time in their schools. Opportunities for further academic study had been embraced by most, with one currently completing a qualification. Comparable comments were made regarding the value of academic study, both for the information gained and the professional connections made. Principals found the debate created through guided discussion on

relevant educational leadership literature to be robust as well as stimulating, often challenging them to re-think their espoused education theory. They commented that their participation in serious intellectual activity had often led to re-defining of their personal pedagogy and this is certainly relevant to my experience! Principals were all able to articulate theories that informed their leadership; while some generic statements were made, there was an identifiable connection made as to the causal relationship between theory and practice. Principals clearly recognised and related to the dynamic relationship between pedagogy and their ability to influence teaching and learning programmes in order to enhance student outcomes.

Principals also recognised the imperative nature of their relationships with colleagues; “we’re all the same”, “a few of us studied at the same time” and “the collegiality of people who are like-minded to you” are examples of connections colleagues felt they had fostered. Interestingly, collegial connections had stemmed from a variety of shared experiences; some emanated from established geographical clusters, where, while schools communities may be diverse, principals shared a common and collaborative approach to education knowledge and purpose. Some principals had chosen to become a participant in a small professional learning community (PLC) led by a regular facilitator. The opportunity to engage, debate and reflect upon the complexities of their positions had ensured their commitment to their PLC for in excess of 10 years.

All principals commented with genuine warmth upon their relationships with their staff, students and school communities. They recognised the significance of their role as a community leader, and the importance of fostering, maintaining and growing the crucial link between the home and the school. They also felt that their professional knowledge and experience enabled them to empower others, to build upon relationships based on trust, respect and openness to extend professional learning opportunities.

#### CONTINUED CAPACITY:

One principal commented “I never think I can’t get up in the morning,” an incidental comment that effectively summarises the commitment to continued capacity identified in colleagues interviewed in this study. It is also important to note an observed passionate connection to the children and staff in schools, as well as the professional development

opportunities seized upon by colleagues. The comment “all PD I’ve been to this year has been useful to our school” is reflective of the identified relevance of professional development offered, as well as the involvement of participants. While colleagues all asserted that they were selective in their professional development, they recognised and clearly articulated that their motivation was two-fold. They attended to engage in professional learning and engage in professional discussion.

Colleagues also maintained a commitment to professional reading and in some cases writing. This individual commitment to keeping abreast of issues and developments in education provided a self-selective opportunity to immerse oneself in the practice of critical thinking. It also enabled reciprocity for the principal as a leader-learner. Collaborative school wide relationships can only be enhanced when the principal actively demonstrates a reciprocal approach to leading and learning.



Dominion Road School, Auckland, New Zealand

## CONCLUSIONS:

Educational leadership is a varied, challenging and immensely rewarding profession. During my travels through four countries I met colleagues who demonstrated an enthusiastic passion for and commitment to their craft, as well as personifying the concept of life long learning. They were all able to articulate the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to be successful in their positions and all stated that they remained dedicated to their school communities, and continued to be empowered by the learning that was happening around them each day.

With regards to “Sustaining Success as Principals of Long Tenure” it became clear, during discussion, that principals were very proud of their tenure. Their active school leadership had resulted in their building clearly defined learning communities “whose work impacted positively and substantively on a range of student outcomes”

Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barrar, H., Fung, I. (2007). *Teacher Professional learning and Development – Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES]*. Education.

While school community contexts are obviously different, principals were all focused on promoting and maintaining a learning culture that included input from all stakeholders. Many identified that this concept had evolved over time and that opportunities for families to become part of the schools professional community of practice, had not only served to increase community knowledge, but had effected an identifiable positive impact on students progress and achievement.

Analysis of data gathered led to the emergence of three broad key themes:

1. Principals as leading learners: importance of professional development
2. Building Capacity
3. Importance of personal/professional networks

Each theme will be summarised separately.

*Principals as leading learners:*

The identification of strategies for sustaining success as a principal with long tenure was my pre-eminent objective and as such discussed with each colleague I visited. As such the importance of professional learning became clear. All principals possessed an acute awareness of the wide range of requirements for their position, that is that principals key objectives include being able to formulate a vision, develop a cohesive culture, establish effective channels of communication, implement professional development in a manner that improves teaching and learning, and guide and direct instructional improvement. (School Leadership and Student Outcomes; Identifying What Works and Why. Best Evidence Synthesis, 2009 p. 69).

All had undertaken specific study designed to accelerate, enrich and extend their knowledge. Many had commenced this study early in their leadership career, and often quite soon after they had identified their initial leadership choice, that being; the first decision of a leader is to become a leader. In most cases principals commenced formal study as an avenue to enable and empower them to increase their pedagogical knowledge (rather than their knowledge of leadership and management systems). Principals recognised that other successful principals demonstrated the ability to create conditions where effective teaching and learning programmes were implemented, and students consistent progress and achievement was readily evidenced by academic data. It is interesting to note that over time, many principals had continued formal study relating to leadership and management, often diversifying their qualification prior to completion. Time and experience had led them to the realisation that in order to sustain their leadership they needed to be fully conversant with a range of theories ranging from pedagogical leadership through what could be (rather loosely) defined as transformational leadership. Principals recognised that “leadership combines collaborative capacity-building with a keen pedagogical focus” (School Leadership and Student Outcomes; Identifying What Works and Why. Best Evidence Synthesis 2009).

Through this process, many principals developed skills relating to selective reading; something which most principals I interviewed use actively to this day. Several commented that they would readily read information recommended by colleagues, as well as recent academic publications. Principals commented that on-going impact of their

reading was two-fold; it increased their professional knowledge of teaching and learning and as such could enable them to provide on-going instructional leadership for teaching and learning programmes, and secondly it inspired them to constantly reaffirm/redefine their own personal leadership theory and practice.

*Building Capacity:*

The building of capacity follows fluidly from principals as leading learners. Principals are charged to establish conditions that facilitate students learning, and it follows on that in order to sustain these conditions principals must also build capacity within their staff and community to ensure that these conditions are validated and that the overall impact of student success is continued. As school vision is communicated and evolves into shared vision collaborative relationships with staff are extended, school culture becomes embedded, and capability for future direction increases. Principals recognise the need to identify and delegate leadership tasks that critically contribute to achieving schools goals; the concept of distributed leadership. When interviewing principals, many spoke of the time needed to build capacity with staff and their communities. They were committed to both and many spoke proudly of their achievements in this area. Community relationships were identified as key indicators of success by all principals, and without labouring the point the time factor in fostering these relationships was deemed as crucial to the on-going success of the relationships. It is time that embeds mutual respect, and for more than one principal, time had empowered them as community leaders to develop common understandings, a strong community ethos and more often than not, obtain community consensus on a wide range of issues. It was interesting to note that respect and reciprocity had been fostered through empowering teachers and families to: share responsibility, take responsibility, have responsibility and to be responsible. (Ministry of Education 2011). Building capacity was evidenced in the recognised provision of high quality opportunities for teacher learning that were sensitive to community aspirations. (School Leadership and Student Outcomes; Identifying What Works and Why. Best Evidence Synthesis 2009).

*Importance of Personal/Professional Networks:*

“Modelling influences do more than provide a social standard against which to judge one’s own capabilities. People seek proficient models who possess the competencies to which they aspire”

Bandura, A. (1994). Self-efficacy. In V.S. Ramachaudran (ed.), *Encyclopedia of human behavior* (Vol. 4,). New York: Academic Press. (Reprinted in H. Friedman (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of mental health*. San Diego: Academic Press, 1998).

All principals interviewed considered their professional networks to be imperative to their success. While this concept may have been articulated more strongly in London, it proved to be a common factor internationally. Like-minded colleagues serve to affirm self efficacy, and while it may be said that self efficacy is an immediate indicator of the personal dispositions of a successful principal, each principal was able to quote experiences where they needed the active support of their colleagues either to affirm or advise them (or indeed both!) Many principals committed to formal professional learning networks/communities where each member participated in rigorous professional discussion pertaining to relevant educational theory/practice, however many also firmly committed themselves to informal groups that had evolved over time and through shared commonality of purpose and mutual respect. Either way, both groups provided participants with the opportunity to engage in critical self reflection, informed debate and reciprocal support. The collegial nature of these groups determined the continued commitment of the participants; often professional development was sourced through these groups. Principals decided together to attend conferences/seminars or to engage in agreed professional readings. The learning from these experiences, being research based presentations, usually on content knowledge or pedagogy, was then able to be further discussed and connected to personal professional development plans or at the very least assimilated into the principals consistently revised theory for practice.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

The research undertaken during this study indicates quite clearly that there are identifiable strategies implemented by principals of long tenure to sustain their success. Internationally, the study identified more correlation between professionals that had been initially envisaged. Current literature recognises a range of theory relating to research, however much of this reading defines sustainable leadership as the ability to manage change or implement reform.

Three discernable practices have been identified as being relevant to *'Sustaining Success as Principals of Long Tenure'*:

1. Principals as leading learners; the commitment to being a life-long learner
2. Building Capacity: to foster, build and maintain staff and community capacity, in order to improve student outcomes.
3. Importance of Personal/Professional Networks: to intentionally connect with colleagues to further enable critical self reflection, responsive leadership and individualised professional development.

There are no doubt other significant factors pertaining to sustaining success as principals of long tenure. These recommendations are based in evidence gathered during face-to-face interviews. Data analysis and all associated comments are solely the work of the author.

# APPENDICIES:

## QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGNED TO PROMOTE DISCUSSION;

### **Question 1 Professional Experiences**

- How long have you been a Principal?
- How many schools have you led as Principal?
- What is/was the school size?
- Urban/rural school?
- What formal qualification study have you engaged in?
- When did you complete this study?

### **Question 2 Theory**

- Have you identified any specific theory that underpins your leadership practice?
- How did you identify/develop your theory?
- What research/professional development have you engaged in extend your theoretical knowledge?
- How has this research/ PD impacted upon your practice?
- How has your knowledge affected staff culture?

### **Question 3 Practice**

- How did you go about initial implementation of your theory into practice in your school (as in was it planned or ad hoc!)?
- Who was involved/ what was their level of prior knowledge?
- What was the initial impact of your practice?
- What did you learn?
- What do you think your staff learned?

### **Question 4 Sustainability**

- Did you plan for sustainable practice?
- How did you plan for sustainability of practice?
- Who was involved?
- Has your initial commitment to your theory changed..how/why?
- What has evolved over time?

**Question 5 Continued Capability**

- What strategies are in place to promote continued capability?
- How do you envisage these strategies progressing should you take leave from your position?
- With regards to our conversation; of what are you most proud?

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