

**SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL PRINCIPALS:  
FACTORS THAT IMPACT ON THEIR SUCCESS**

**Ross Notman  
Annie Henry  
Darrell Latham  
Paul Potaka  
Denis Slowley  
Peter Ross**

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*Contact information:*

Dr Ross Notman  
Senior Lecturer  
Director, Centre for Professional Development and Educational Leadership  
University of Otago College of Education  
PO Box 56  
Dunedin, New Zealand  
Tel: 64 03 479 5461  
Email: [ross.notman@otago.ac.nz](mailto:ross.notman@otago.ac.nz)

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores the concept of school leadership with particular reference to six case studies of New Zealand primary and secondary school principals. Preliminary findings suggest that factors behind their success may lie in the areas of their understanding and application of contingent leadership, authentic leadership, and their resilient capabilities.*

**Keywords:** Successful Principals; Contingent Leadership; Authenticity; Resiliency

## **INTRODUCTION**

This conference paper is based on a multi national research study whose purpose is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of successful school leaders in primary and secondary schools in different socio-economic circumstances in different countries.

The educational leadership literature is replete with examples of exemplary practice within a successful school principalship. However, principals do not enact their leadership and managerial roles in precisely the same way. Some principals influence their schools by means of their personality while others demonstrate leadership capacity through the strength of their convictions. For example, in the New Zealand leadership literature, Notman's (2005) research into the personal and professional working lives of two secondary principals demonstrated the centrality of core personal values in their influence on principal leadership behaviours.

The literature also acknowledges the concept of **situational** or **contingent leadership** in the field of school leadership, whereby it is quite meaningless to study the leadership behaviours of principals without reference to the wider school context in which they operate. Contextual variables may include student background, community type, organisational structure, school culture, teacher experience and competence, financial resources, school size, and bureaucratic and labour organisation (Hallinger, 2003).

## **DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

Multi-site case study methods were employed during the research study in a sample of six primary and secondary schools that reflects the principle of 'maximum variation sampling' (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Two regions in New Zealand were selected in order to allow for geographical differences to emerge. Questionnaire and interview data were collected from each school principal,

deputy principal, Board of Trustees chairperson, and a selection of teachers, support staff, parents and students. The process of inductive cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) provided a rich source of data about the characteristics of successful school leadership.

This paper presents initial findings from the early stages of data analyses of six schools selected for the study: two urban primary schools, one semi rural primary school; two urban secondary schools and a rural secondary school.

## **PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

### **School A**

School A is a low decile primary school with a diverse community and student population. Maori, Pacific Island and Burmese children make up 80% of the school roll of 285 students. The male principal has been in the position for 14 years. Previously, he was deputy principal at the school for almost six years.

Since his appointment, the principal has been involved in changing the *culture of the school*. He remarks that this was “a conscious decision to change the culture of the school, based on observations and perceptions from other people [and] agencies about the school.” Subsequent discussion with community groups had advocated a number of changes to the school culture: “... a school being a safe school, being fun, having high expectations for our young students, and having the very best teachers available to be here.”

*Community characteristics* influence the behaviour and needs of children. There are children who have special educational needs while others have mental health issues. Some families have a strong desire for their children to do well, although there is some variation on the issue of expectations [or lack of] parents hold for their children.

The school and community present a number of *challenges* for the principal and staff. The inability of families to access resources is an ongoing problem. However, the principal believes that most family groups have a rare quality, a “reality... about the real world, not the material things.” He sees the inability of many parents to effectively carry out the role expected of a good parent as a major challenge in its impact on students’ level of achievement.

Poverty is clearly a challenge for some families and this influences the way teachers go about their work. A teacher commented: "There is a handful of families that you know, who struggle to get anything returned or money, and the kids sometimes end up missing out [on activities] if they don't have [parental] consent." Other challenges within the community include households with low qualifications; houses with large numbers of people; and households with large numbers of health issues.

An interesting trend is the current *public perception of the school*. It appears to have become fashionable for houses in the area to be marketed as belonging "in the A area". The principal comments:

We also get the trendy middle class who like to see their children being involved in a multi cultural school; so we get groups... who, I think, get a kick out of saying that their child goes down to B... It is unique for our school to have that choice being made.

### **School B**

School B is a high decile school set in a small semi rural town. The student roll of 237 is predominantly European, with 7% Maori and a growing number of new English immigrants (12%). The female principal has been in the post for six years.

Since her appointment, the principal has undertaken significant *educational changes*. First, she has unified the school and its community behind a vision of learning. This unity was achieved through an emphasis on school expectations, improved behaviour management, innovative curriculum development and the accessibility of the principal herself.

There was concern expressed by the principal that, on arrival, there was nothing in the school that indicated a current thinking education. This is confirmed by a teacher's response about school improvement:

We're continually developing and designing programmes if you like. We're looking forward to next year in terms of how we can do everything even better than what we believe it is now.

The principal makes a concerted effort to be available to staff and believes that important leadership qualities focus on relationships, openness and humour. She has very effective lines of communication, a strong sense of professionalism, and an energy and passion for the job.

Respondent interviews also identify the principal's major *leadership achievements*. These include her innovative vision for learning and how that vision is driven by staff access to professional development opportunities. The principal is also successful in gaining the necessary resource funding to complete the school building programme: a new hall and library, a 'Professional Development' room, as well as upgrading and increasing computing technologies.

In summary, this principal has set a bold course in terms of pedagogical direction and has achieved buy in to that pedagogy from all community stakeholders.

### **School C**

School C is a high decile co-educational secondary school for students aged 13-18 years. It has in excess of 1000 students and a staff of 97 teachers. The male principal has been in the position for seven years and leads a school whose focus is on producing a well-rounded individual with a balance of academic learning, sports and the arts.

Respondents note the *successful impact of the principal on students, staff and the community*. In the past, the school had experienced difficulties in moving forward in its strategic directions. Now there is a plan in place to ensure that this happens. Under the current principal's leadership, the school has grown in size. In addition, the principal is viewed as contributing significantly to the unification of the wider school community.

There is a *complexity underlying the relationships that principals have with their school community*. This principal encourages a curricular balance between academic and sporting pursuits, and preparing each student for the world of work. He is extremely visible to the school community and attends nearly all school activities which is a considerable commitment. He works to build trust through consistency, visibility, a quick response to needs and the involvement of others. For example, morning staff meetings involve the entire staff who share in this responsibility.

There are several indicators that the principal is fostering *resiliency*. He develops a positive connection with educators, students and parents by being engaged with others. An example is the student programme that promotes self-reflection and responsibility.

Another of the principal's capabilities lies in *developing relationships with diverse populations*. Numbers of Maori and Pacific Island students are low because there is not a large population in the area. The principal does, however, include students and parents in decision making so that their voices are heard. One of the principal's strengths is his ability to develop trusting positive relationships across all ethnic groups.

### **School D**

School D is an urban primary school of 350 students and 19 teachers. Its male principal has been 10 years in a school that is located in a mid range socio-economic area.

The principal's role as an *effective leader* in the school is perceived as being 'purposeful' and sincere, based on his holistic interest in the school community. He is viewed as one member of a coherent staff and Board of Trustees team, supporting professional growth and developing professional performance. His personal values and ethical approach to school leadership underpin his principalship and reinforce a deeply-held philosophical understanding of the principal's job: "I don't have a lot of time for things that seem self... it doesn't mean to sound moral but sometimes I see people who work effectively in a role, any role, they start to get motivated in things that are in it for them... I don't certainly think about it a lot but I do really feel grounded in the morality of what I do."

*Raising student achievement* is of considerable importance to this principal. This impetus reflects research relating to the critical role of leadership for organisational learning and improved student outcomes. As a key direction, the principal is particularly focused on a child-centred curriculum and is prepared to build student learning around that concept: "If we have areas of data where we're concerned about academic results, children's progress, we'll actually deliberately then build our professional learning programme for the year ahead, or for multiple years, around that need."

The development of *quality relationships* is a cornerstone of this principal's leadership style. His perceived style is facilitative, consultative, and one that leads him to seek quality feedback from people. The principal also acknowledges that there is a need to offer firm and decisive leadership

when required: “There are things that are not open to democratic decision. Do we want good things for our children? Can we do better? Those things aren’t things you should ever take a vote on – they should be givens.”

### **School E**

School E is a year 9-13 girls’ secondary school in a metropolitan area. It has a staff in excess of 50 teachers and approximately 800 students of whom 40 are international students. The female principal has been in the job for 13 years, having been promoted from the position of deputy principal.

*School-wide success factors* reside in the areas of positive relationships between staff and students; a regular update of staff professional development; maintenance of quality teaching staff; power sharing among staff, students, parents and trustees; and the quality of the senior leadership team.

The role of the principal in this success can be identified in her empowerment of staff and students, and her desire to build leadership capacity in both groups. Her instructional leadership, and her capacity to be self-critical of her own leadership performance, are additional features. This is underpinned by the principal’s understanding of the concept of authentic leadership: “I would go with Duignan on his authentic leadership. Be yourself. Don’t fudge anything. Don’t be dishonest. If you’re not authentic, they know!”

This quotation leads on to particular aspects of the principal’s *leadership style* such as her democratic, power sharing style of leadership, combined with an important element: “Listening is more important than speaking around here, way more important.”

There are other occasions when the principal leads ‘from the middle’ (eg during staff meeting discussions as a participant) or adopts a very direct approach in dealing with negative attitudes. A key theme here is flexibility, moving from democratic through to autocratic stances: “So you move up and down that line according to human behaviour.”

Problematic *contingent leadership* issues centre on aspects such as mental health issues of parents; in-house disciplinary procedures of the school being challenged through the courts; associated threats of litigation from disaffected parents on behalf of their children. Of concern to the staff are

external barriers to learning: “It’s their out-of-school activities on a weekend, starting in the second half of year 10 and going into year 11, and the failure of parents to respond to that in an effective way.” Clearly, some of the challenges faced by the school, and other schools throughout New Zealand, are reflected by external influences in the student and parent world outside of the school gates.

### **School F**

School F is a high decile and rural co-educational secondary school of 640 students aged 10-19 years. It has a national and international reputation for innovation. The male principal has been 17 years at the school, the first seven years as deputy principal.

Principal self-reflection reveals a number of *factors behind the overall success* of the school. These include a safe learning environment for all students; a strong and positive interrelationship between teachers and students; a high degree of academic success as detailed in national examination results; a high level of student involvement in extra curricular activities; a supportive Board of Trustees who are fully prepared to assume governance and policy-making responsibilities; and positive perceptions of the school. As the only secondary school in the district, it has been able to adopt an experimental style of teaching and learning.

It is of interest to note the identified *leadership characteristics* of the principal. Initially, his focus was on management issues at a micro level. Little delegation was employed and leadership represented an understanding of detail and being involved in everything. During the last five years, however, the principal has operated at a macro level of education and of staff empowerment. He is now in the role of a pedagogical leader who visits classrooms regularly. Major leadership characteristics include excellent interpersonal skills; a strong sense of optimism in regard to students and the school’s direction; personable; approachable; awareness of the community; consultative; active listener; honest; ethical; willingness to let other people try things; high profile and school visibility; and loyalty to the school.

The principal’s leadership is frequently referred to as charismatic and personable. The principal himself accepts his leadership style may not be transferable to an urban school where expectations of the school are more defined by individual stakeholders and therefore may be more contested.



## INITIAL IMPLICATIONS

Three focus areas suggest themselves from these initial findings of New Zealand case studies. First, there is reinforced the notion of contingent leadership and an awareness of external issues that might impact on students' level of achievement in particular. The principals demonstrate an influential capacity to promote a symbiotic relationship between school and community. School B and School C's principals are perceived to have unified the community through their school links and inclusive leadership styles. The principal of the low decile School A has gradually changed public perception to a point where it is now a school of choice for high socio-economic parents.

The literature identifies a contingent approach to school leadership as one which draws the "conjunction of the person and the situation" (Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley and Beresford, 2000, p. 10). The writers recommend the application of contingency leadership "which takes into account the realities of successful principalship of schools in changing times, and moves beyond polarised concepts of transactional and transformational leadership" (Day et al., 2000, p. 456). From these preliminary findings, one can realise the importance of how school principals respond to the unique set of contextual circumstances presented to them.

A second area focuses on principal resiliency and the promotion of resiliency in others. The principal of School C demonstrates resilient qualities and seeks to encourage resiliency among his students via a learning programme that targets self-reflection and responsibility. The principals of Schools D and E possess strong deeply-held convictions about moral and ethical bases of operating a school and a surety in taking their respective schools forward in strategically planned and philosophically informed directions. Not only is the process of self-reflection and self-belief an element of leadership resiliency and a sign of one's capacity for self-renewal (Oplatka, Bargal & Inbar, 2001), but a principal's positive connectedness with members of their school and community groups provides meaning and value to their professional lives (Milstein & Henry, 2008).

Finally, the principals of Schools D, E and F underline authentic leadership practices in establishing a successful school through their professional self-reflection and philosophical stances – a mark of experienced principals who recognise the need to maintain high levels of self-awareness and of intellectual understandings about school leadership (Notman & Slowley, 2004). This theme of authentic leadership has been promoted, for example, by Begley (2006) in his proposal of three pre-

requisites for authentic leadership by school principals: self-knowledge, a capacity for moral reasoning and sensitivity to the orientations of others.

However, there is a growing awareness that such authentic leadership is not an end in itself. There may be links between authentic leadership by principals (and teachers) and the concept of 'authentic learning' by students in the classroom (Duignan & Bezzina, 2004). Duignan (2006) also adds his interpretation of what makes an authentic educational leader, be they teacher, deputy principal or principal:

They name, challenge and change, if at all possible, teaching practices that promote inauthentic learning (e.g. teaching narrowly to focus on tests). They have the courage of their convictions and stand up for what they see as ethically and morally 'right', especially in regard to the ways in which teachers and students engage with learning content and processes (p. 131)

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has revealed insights from preliminary data analyses of six New Zealand primary and secondary school case studies, in which the work of effective school principals is being examined to determine possible leadership factors in their school's success.

Despite their success, each educational leader faces ongoing challenges in their principalship. Contingencies include social and health issues of impoverished families, accompanied by pressures on the school to become the 'hub' or focal point of their community. Within schools, principals face leadership challenges, for example, in the form of maintaining staff motivation in light of continuing social and educational change, and the complexities of attending to teachers' personal and professional needs.

Therefore, what kind of leaders will be needed as principals of future schools? In the opinion of School E's principal: "Well, just your absolutely authentic, sincere, hard-working, energetic, perfect person who is really hard to find!"

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