



Meat in the Sandwich: The Impact of Changing Policy Contexts and Local Management of Schools on Principals' Work in New Zealand 1989-2009

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ABSTRACT

The impact of principal leadership on school outcomes, particularly student achievement, is assuming unprecedented attention internationally. Official discourses often assume that principals can be trained to achieve prescribed outcomes through the employment of learned strategies. Such claims are challenged by critical leadership scholars who insist on the significance of context. This paper explores the impact of policy contexts on the work of a small group of experienced principals in New Zealand over a period of 20 years. During that time, they often struggled to reconcile their own espoused educational principles with policy imperatives in a small country where Local Management of Schools (LMS) has been extreme. It argues that national policy discourse around competition, curriculum and achievement, together with formal accountability to local lay Boards of Trustees (BOTs), are sources of tension and moral ambiguity, which tempt principals to comply and play the game for the sake of their schools. Principals are also caught between local and national accountabilities. In spite of this, principals in the study maintained an educational vision encompassing the wider social context of New Zealand education and retained a sense of personal agency.

INTRODUCTION

Principal leadership has assumed unprecedented international importance over the past two decades. Harris (2003) contends there is 'a prominent belief in the leadership of the head-teacher as the single source and direction of leadership in the school' (p. 72). Leadership preparation programmes have been mandated in a number of countries, often on the assumption that leadership strategies can be learned and put into effect by principals in a variety of situations. As evidence about the impact of principal leadership on staff and student achievement has grown (Bell, Bolam & Cubillo, 2003; Hallinger, Bickman & Davis, 1996; Harris *et al.*, 2003; Robinson, 2007), the underlying assumptions of such programmes have shifted from a 1990s' focus on managerial efficiency, underpinned by neo-liberal theories, to leadership of learning, measured by national reported testing. This has been emphasised in New Zealand through the publication of the Leadership Best Evidence Synthesis (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009). But Gronn (2003)

suggests national preparation programmes may lead to 'designer leadership' with principals appointed to achieve prescribed outcomes and deliver government objectives through following approved strategies. Gunter and Thomson (2009) explore how individuals are 'made over' by the system with a promise of transformation that largely ignores context.

Critical leadership studies challenge these discourses, insisting on the centrality of ethical and professional dilemmas in the work of educational leadership (Grace, 1995), value conflict as a key component of organisational life (Greenfield & Ribbins, 1993), and the need to interrelate technical competence and moral complexities (Hodgkinson, 1978). Gronn and Ribbins (1996) stress the interaction of human agency and social structure while Ball (1987) demonstrated the importance of micro-politics within schools. They assert that leadership does not exist in a vacuum – contexts impose limits and constraints, local environments provide challenge and possibilities, and each organisation comprises a range of individuals with differing values and expectations. A number of writers show that local school contexts make a significant difference to the effectiveness of different policy and leadership approaches (Smyth & McInerney, 2007; Thomson, 2002; Thrupp & Lupton, 2006, 2011).

While context is assuming greater importance across leadership research and development programmes, there is increasing emphasis on the interaction between local and national policy imperatives and the personality of the principal. Hallinger (2003) suggests that the suitability of leadership models is linked to factors in both the external environment and the local context of a school. MacBeath adds another dimension. Writing of the search to identify 'effective schools', he asserted, 'we have discovered just how much context, ecology and *individual experience* matter' (MacBeath, 1999, p. 12, my italics).

The initial aim of the research underpinning this paper was to explore through in-depth interviews whether principals who moved from one school to another were shaped by the new context to behave differently. Did their leadership change if they moved to a school in a different geographical area, with a different socio-economic and ethnic configuration? However, as findings emerged, it became obvious that, while each school demanded a different approach, the changes to systemic structures and educational discourse instituted by successive governments over the past 20 years, had a greater effect on these principals and their work. Fitzgerald and Gunter (2011) contend that internationally 'the purposes of education have irrevocably changed from education for citizenship to education to acquire the necessary skills to engage in consumptive practices in the global marketplace' (p. 90). Principals in this study, deeply committed to student learning and professional integrity, reported struggling to reconcile their own espoused educational principles with national policy imperatives and accountabilities. They were not opposed to change and did not want to return to old systemic structures. But they perceived a clash of values between ideas underpinning many of the changes and the commitment to egalitarianism, equal opportunities, holistic education and professional collegiality they professed. At the same time systemic changes made them formally accountable to local lay Boards of Trustees (BOTs). Thus they become the 'meat in the sandwich'.

Principals are caught between the legitimate expectations of government, mediated through educational bureaucracy, and expectations of

staff and parents that their local wishes will be privileged. They are caught between two different models of democracy: 'One that emphasises representation and elections (representative democracy) and one that emphasises local deliberation and participation (democratic localism)' (Strike, 2007, p. 97). This leads to ethical dilemmas as principals are expected to be official change agents implementing government educational policies while at the same time catering for local needs and expectations.

This paper explores some impacts of systemic structures and policy expectations on principals' leadership beliefs and behaviours over 20 years in New Zealand since the implementation of *Tomorrow's Schools* (Lange, 1988). It examines the experiences of long serving educational leaders as they wrestled with the effects of competition, isolation and entrepreneurialism, mediated government and parental expectations, and struggled with accountability for raising student achievement. It argues that national policy and educational discourse, together with accountability to local BOTs, can be sources of tension and moral ambiguity. Principals, caught between national and local accountabilities, may be tempted to comply and play the game for the sake of their schools. Nevertheless, the principals in the study maintained an educational vision encompassing the wider social context of New Zealand education and retained a sense of personal agency.

BACKGROUND

The external political context and dominant educational discourses in which New Zealand schools operate have changed in major ways since the first leadership appointments of some study participants during the late 1980s. At that time primary school principal appointments were made by regional Education Boards and depended on inspectorial grading results. Schools had little discretionary spending and primary principals had no say in the appointment of staff. The implementation of *Tomorrow's Schools*, which introduced Local Management of Schools (LMS) by elected BOTs, was a major shift, particularly as it coincided with a swing towards neo-liberalism, with competition as an espoused driver of excellence. As a result much principal time and energy in the 1990s was focussed on drawing up charters, writing policies, and learning to deal with budgets and property. The Education Review Office (ERO) conducted compliance audits to ensure that this work had been completed. Several principals reiterated Wylie's (1997) claim that this deflected attention away from what was happening in school classrooms. Two of the sample, who had been principals in the early 1990s, initially found the promised new freedom of LMS exhilarating but have since found it illusory, complaining that 'external controls are being imposed on a daily basis' (Principal, P4).

Since the early 2000s, government policy focus has been the improvement of learning outcomes, with consequent emphasis on achievement data, planning and accountability. A majority of the principals in this study acknowledged 'huge pressure' currently, particularly in low socio-economic schools, for what they saw as measurable and narrowly defined student achievement. Thrupp (2010), extending Gronn's claims about 'designer leadership', suggests that recent New Zealand government policies to provide training and support for school leaders emphasise the difference school leaders can make to student achievement if they follow recommended strategies. Little

attention is given to the different contexts in which principals work or to the nexus between local governance and central policy in which they operate. A comprehensive and complex review of School Leadership and Student Outcomes (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009), commissioned by the Ministry of Education (MOE), appeared soon after the interviews for this study were completed. It provides research underpinning the view that leadership matters to student outcomes and evidence of 'what works and why'. However, as Thrupp (2010) has noted, it tends to accept rather than critique the context of self-managing schools.

Over the past 20 years there have also been significant changes to the global social context in which schools operate. In New Zealand, changes in the demographic configuration of schools towards ethnic and linguistic diversity have occurred at the same time as a widening income gap. Since the implementation of *Tomorrow's Schools*, education for citizenship has been replaced by education for economic advantage (Court & O'Neill, 2011; The Treasury, 1987). LMS and neo-liberalism in the 1990s encouraged parents to regard schools as centres for buying services though this rhetoric softened after 2000. The period has also seen changing government attitudes to Māori aspirations, including the return of alienated land and the preservation of te reo (language) and tikanga (belief and custom). In some areas this has resulted in white flight or backlash. The digital revolution has widened access to information but ironically also enabled the current emphasis on data and league tables.

Key recommendations of the Picot report (Picot, 1988), on which LMS in New Zealand was based, were to give power to local communities and restrict the role of the new Ministry of Education to policy development. However, since the mid 1990s the MOE has taken a greater role in policy implementation. There have been two new national curriculum documents, a new system of senior school qualifications, new planning and reporting protocols and more overt accountability mechanisms. After the interviews took place, the government announced in 2010 that schools must report to parents and the MOE on how each student has achieved against national standards for literacy and numeracy. This caused dilemmas for many principals, fearful of the potential impact on students. National and local groups of principals have argued against speedy implementation of the policy without prior testing, fearing it might narrow the curriculum and lead to league tables of schools being published (Buutveld, 2010). In this they drew on expressed concerns of academics (Thrupp, Hattie, Crooks & Flockton, 2009). Some schools have dealt with the conflict between their beliefs and government expectations by taking a more activist stance (Thrupp, 2011).

THE SAMPLE

This study was designed to explore how the local and national contexts in which they worked impacted on the lived experience of a small group of principals. The ten principals in the study were identified through a snowball technique. To be included they needed to have a reputation among peers for effective leadership of their schools and to have been principal of more than one school or held a nationally recognised educational leadership role. One has led five schools, four have led four and several have had national leadership

roles in teacher unions or the educational bureaucracy. Three were secondary and seven were primary school principals; six female and four male. Between them they have held principal roles in 29 schools ranging from decile one (low SES) to decile ten (high SES) in both urban and rural settings. School sizes varied from a staff of two to schools with more than 100 teachers. Student ethnic configuration ranged from 85% Pakeha (non-Māori) to 99% Māori, while one school had a multi-cultural mix of over 50 nationalities. The sample thus covered diverse experience.

None of the principals had any formal leadership training before appointment to their first principalship though those appointed before 1989 had help from rural advisers or inspectors. Six were first appointed to small schools (two to five teachers) as 'teaching principals', moving to larger institutions as their confidence and experience grew. A number reported their leadership skills had been honed by community activities, such as sports administration, toastmasters, Federated Farmers of New Zealand or union involvement. However, by the time of the interviews, almost all had completed postgraduate study in education and leadership and had found this of tremendous benefit in revealing 'big picture' issues and enabling them to reflect on their practice.

Lengthy semi-structured interviews with each participant resulted in rich descriptions of practice and beliefs, providing material illuminative of the challenges educational leaders face in a range of contexts. Questions probed for detailed information about each of their schools, their traditions and values, and the changing policy environments in which they operated. They were asked about aims, challenges, dilemmas, support and achievement and their perceptions of the expectations of stakeholders such as parents, Trustees, staff and the MOE. They also reflected on what experience had taught them about key aspects of their leadership roles and the dispositions needed to carry them out. This included the relative importance of what they brought to each role (attributes, knowledge, skills, relationships) and that of the context in which they worked. Finally they were asked to comment on a statement by Kenneth Strike (2007) on the purpose of schools and then to suggest essential learning for new principals.

The data were subjected to content analysis through close and repeated readings, category generation and saturation. To protect anonymity, the gender of interviewees has been deliberately mixed during the reporting and those who are quoted directly are referred to as P1, P2 and so on.

FINDINGS

The key findings, developed from analysis of the semi-structured interviews, are reported under three themes:

- 1) working with local management of schools;
- 2) mediating between MOE demands and community/ parental expectations; and,
- 3) dealing with pressures to be competitive and entrepreneurial.

Finally, some alternative views of school purposes and leadership strategies are briefly discussed.

1. Working with local management of schools

Getting appointed

Tomorrow's Schools brought significant changes to the appointment of primary principals in New Zealand. While secondary principals had always been appointed by Boards of Governors, until 1989 primary principals were appointed by regional Education Boards to any vacancy at the level for which they were officially qualified by seniority and grading. The issue of 'fit' between an applicant and the school community was not always accorded high priority. Theoretically LMS, where decisions on the appointment of school principals are now the prerogative of the local BOT, elected by parents of the school, should result in congruence between the values and skills of principals and local community expectations. To some extent this is borne out by the findings. Several principals reported they applied to schools that they felt reflected their beliefs, not just jobs that were larger and more challenging than their existing posts.

Local community input into principal selection under LMS also ostensibly increases the democratic nature of schooling. However, this process may lead to perceived injustice and a lack of equal employment opportunity for women. Principal appointments mirror the low number of female appointments to private Boards of Directors in New Zealand (Business NZ, 2009). A number of the participants expressed strong views that able women applicants miss out on appointment because of the conservative social attitudes held by BOTs. They suggested that some Boards, holding to a heroic trait discourse of leadership, espouse a preference for a white, male, strong disciplinarian leader that works against the appointment of experienced and highly qualified female applicants. Their claims reflect Brooking's findings, in her study of principal appointments, that some Board chairs, reflecting on reasons for appointment of a particular applicant, 'spoke quite candidly about personal qualities which would not have been part of the stated criteria' (Brooking, 2008, p. 6) mentioning words such as 'young' and 'male'. This issue appeared particularly strong in some rural communities where first time principals often find appointments and could impede the advancement of able women. Four female participants in the study had either been given specific feedback that while they were the best candidate for a particular leadership role they were not appointed because a male was preferred or had withdrawn an application when they realised they had no chance of appointment because of Board beliefs. One selected a school to apply for as it already had four male staff and she felt the playing field would be more level. A male principal, on the other hand, suspected that he fitted the model his Board were looking for: 'the male sporting rah rah type' (P3). Another reflected:

Their perception of what made a good principal made it seem being male would be a help. Being able to get out and spend a long time leading sports and leading from the front rather than working alongside people was what the Board and staff expected. (P2)

Meeting Board expectations

Principals interviewed perceived that while BOT members judged principal credibility in a variety of ways, the competitive ethos allied with LMS led them to value particularly the ability to establish a strong public image in the eyes of local opinion leaders. This could increase the roll (and thus school funding). Seven suggested that Boards wanted an articulate principal who would be a public advocate for the school, 'convince the community that their kids were getting a good deal' (P4), and who 'could talk teaching and learning' (P3). As a result of this external focus, principals were encouraged to join Rotary clubs, lobby real estate agents, play golf, and be part of professional networks as well as communicating with parents. Holding a masters degree impressed Board members and gave principals confidence in expressing their professional views publicly. Credibility could be judged idiosyncratically, however: a female principal was not finally accepted by the rural community around her school till 'pet day' revealed that she was able to recognise the finer points of Romney sheep.

Once appointed, principals were not only expected to meet MOE guidelines but were also subject to the policies and expectations of their BOTs, particularly Board Chairs. Although three saw the relationship as unproblematic, and several said they used their Chairs as sounding boards, this is a power relationship with potential for misunderstanding or conflict. Several principals regretted there was little or no Board feedback on their performance. One complained that his BOT could jump the gun and try to establish policies that were management rather than governance matters and that he had then to mend fences with staff. Another, who faced a hostile staff that had preferred another candidate for the job, found the Board took a hands-off approach. Though they had appointed him to make changes in the school, they provided no help when staff resisted the directions they had mandated. They saw their role as appointing but not necessarily supporting the principal. Principals noted that Board elections could result in a new team with different ideas and without institutional knowledge, necessitating further relationship building and negotiation.

All those in the study were well aware that relationships with BOTs needed to be worked on and wondered how they would cope if things went wrong. A number had witnessed the devastating effect in other schools when Boards and principals disagreed and had known colleagues whose careers were destroyed. One believed that, 'you are only ever as safe as your last Board meeting' (P8). Two reflected that maintaining a balance between honestly sharing uncertainties and providing a confident veneer could be problematic and pose ethical dilemmas. Nor could they often share issues with other local principals because of the competitive climate, though meeting with principals from other areas at conferences was often helpful.

Dealing with dilemmas

Advising their local Boards on controversial government policies could create major moral dilemmas for principals, torn between their own professional beliefs and supposed advantage for their school. A prime example was their response to a government decision to introduce total bulk funding of schools on a voluntary basis in the mid 1990s. While the introduction of LMS had given

schools full control of their operational funding, teachers' salaries were still paid nationally according to a scale agreed with the teacher unions. Bulk funding allowed schools to pay teachers from an overall allocation, making decisions about staff configuration through juggling numbers and experience. After a limited trial with 70 schools, the National-led Coalition Government gave schools the option of accepting higher levels of funding if they also took responsibility for staffing costs, gaining additional flexibility and the potential to pay higher salaries. This course of action was fought vigorously by the teacher unions which opposed merit pay and local determination of salaries. This had the potential to impact negatively on the local context in which principals worked. However, the scheme proved attractive to some parents and BOTs and by March 1999 27% of schools had opted for bulk funding (Wylie & Wilkie, 2001).

Two participants in the study, both at that time principals of low-decile secondary schools, described the ethical tensions they faced as a result of the bulk funding initiative. One, a convinced opponent of bulk funding, believed it essential to demonstrate to the BOT that their inadequate school finances would benefit substantially (\$130,000) from endorsing bulk funding, while at the same time informing Board members of the reasons for her own deep opposition to the scheme. The Board supported her stance. Another principal, who was initially opposed as were most of the Board and staff, organised a school based action research project over four months which convinced him and the BOT to accept the funding, believing it would benefit the disadvantaged students in their school and that it would be wrong to reject the additional money. They were able to get rid of their deficit and put 'significant sums' into school resourcing over three years. Bulk funding was ended in 2001 after a change of government.

2. Mediating government and parental expectations of curriculum and achievement

As Fiske and Ladd (2000) note, self-managing schools remain agents of the state. Principals, as chief executives, are responsible for implementing state mandated changes to curriculum and assessment. With staff they need to negotiate their way through curriculum and assessment changes in what they perceive to be the interests of students. This is a normal part of the professional role and the New Zealand curriculum documents provide room for local interpretation. But principals are also expected to champion government espoused educational ideas to the wider parental community, a task at times daunting and time-consuming. The future-focused New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007), mandatory from 2010, can be challenging for school leaders to explain to parents. Even if principals were firm supporters of curriculum changes, lack of congruence between mandated curriculum, new forms of pedagogy and assessment, and community expectations posed problems.

The challenge differs across contexts. The principal of a high-decile primary school with successful, tertiary educated parents reported that most parents believed the traditional classroom organisation and curriculum content they experienced as children should continue. These parents found it difficult to conceive of literacy beyond the decoding of text in books, felt that ICT could be left until secondary level, and resented time spent on activities they conceived

as 'purely fun'. At another high-decile school, parents sometimes interpreted quirky architecture, bright colours and an informal atmosphere as signalling a lack of seriousness.

When I show prospective parents around here where it's open-plan and it's all team teaching and upstairs, downstairs and we walk into the classroom and we see kids lying on the floor, you can see them draw breath. (P6)

On the other hand, there were communities where parents needed considerable encouragement to be involved in their children's education and often lacked confidence in their ability to contribute. In low-decile schools, especially those where parents were not familiar with New Zealand traditions, principals needed to find ways to bring them into school.

It's very hard to work around the idea of parents' understanding of education if they think that if you send the child to school and they're quiet and they listen then somehow it'll just be bored into them. That whole concept of being actively involved in education is still something we've got to come to grips with. Most of our parents really want their kids to do well but many don't kind of understand some of the processes that are needed to support that. (P7)

Most principals in the study noted that government mandated accountabilities had become more pressing over the past decade. This echoes findings in the United Kingdom and Australia (Gronn, 2003; Webb *et al.*, 2006; Reid & Thomson, 2003). Most principals felt pressured by the MOE's current emphasis on raising student achievement. Since 2000 the MOE and the government have drawn on international surveys that appear to indicate that New Zealand has high intra-school variation and a longer than desired 'tail'. At the same time, government rhetoric makes use of research studies (Alton-Lee, 2003; Hattie, 2009; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009; Timperley, 2007) that insist on the power of quality teaching to make a significant difference to student achievement, especially those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. It is an easy step from here to assigning a major share of the blame for lower than expected achievement to lack of teacher quality. Principals of low-decile schools with transient students felt they were being held responsible for issues outside their control.

There's huge pressure we feel about student achievement, which becomes very marked in a low-decile school. It's almost as though you are being held responsible for an awful lot of things you don't actually have control over. That's not to say it lets you off the hook for the highest expectations and the very best you can do for children but it concerns me that it seems to be quite a narrow view of achievement. (P7)

Most principals admitted to feeling 'squeezed' or pressured by the requirements to document individual progress and provide and analyse data, both through the planning and reporting processes with the MOE and through

ERO inspections. One principal used a driving analogy to describe what she believed was a low trust model. She suggested principals were given the keys to the car but told that the owner would be in the passenger seat watching all the time.

Like colleagues in Britain (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005; Webb *et al.*, 2006), principals found the narrow official achievement emphasis constricting and contrary to their own view of what was important to engage their students. While most reported strategies to maintain a focus on the whole child and the wider curriculum, they wondered how long this would be possible with the narrowed official emphasis on literacy and numeracy. The effect on their sense of themselves as competent professionals was affected if, in spite of their efforts, achievement results in key areas remained below expected norms. The fact that students won music and drama competitions, decorated the school with high quality artwork, or ran a peer-counselling programme which had reduced behavioural issues, appeared not to count.

Evaluation visits from ERO were also seen as problematic, mirroring accounts of Ofsted inspections in England (Southworth, 1998; Webb *et al.*, 2006). Most principals believed that ERO took a narrow view of achievement and insisted on unnecessary paperwork, at the same time declining to take into account less formal evidence of progress. Principals in low-decile schools felt they were pressured to perform at comparable levels to high-decile schools rather than being able to account for the 'value-added' they had achieved. This, too, caused moral dilemmas. Some took a stance categorised by Hoyle and Wallace (2005) as ironic. They felt forced to comply because of the importance of gaining a positive report:

It's almost like you're playing a game and you get better at it because you know, or if you're smart enough you'll figure out, what it is they're actually looking for and to what degree and when the stakes are high in terms of public reporting you think you deserve a positive report and so you don't want to sort of give people ammunition so I guess they're moral dilemmas.

How upfront and honest are you with people like ERO?

I can remember one ERO visit where I had quite an unpleasant experience with a review officer about reporting against ethnicity and I said no we don't. I said you can ask me about any child in this school and I can tell you where they're at, but I don't see any justification for reporting against ethnicity. What upset me was that she wasn't prepared to actually engage in a discussion about it. (P7)

Promoting student achievement could be a two-edged sword for those who supported the government's emphasis as it could generate unintended local results. One principal reported 'coming in all guns blazing' to raise achievement in a high-decile school which was perceived to be coasting. After a year this stance was modified:

We've got to be a little bit careful because now we've got parents who are so focused on student achievement that they're worried, they're rushing into the classrooms looking through children's books to see who's in whose reading group and so on, so now I'm really pushing the key competencies because it's about the holistic child. So it was almost like the strong focus on the measurable stuff was the message I was giving in newsletters maybe and parents' evenings even though I didn't really believe that's all we're about. So I'm pulling back a little bit. (P6)

3. Dealing with workload pressures, competition and entrepreneurialism

New Zealand has possibly moved further down the path of self-managing and locally governed schools than any other country (Fiske & Ladd, 2000), though Smyth (2011) claims that the Australian State of Victoria provides the most extreme example. As in the United Kingdom, Australia and Finland (Gronn, 2003; Hoyle & Wallace, 2005; Webb *et al.*, 2006), this has changed and added to principal workload and increased competition between schools. The reforms of the early 1990s forced principals to learn about finance and property, areas that had formerly been the responsibility of professional administrators employed by Education Boards. Often they felt they should protect the staff by taking on the paperwork themselves so staff were left free to teach. They all felt this burden was massive. Until recently, there has been little recognition of the new expertise principals are expected to develop, little official acknowledgement of the paperwork demands, and in primary schools at least, few resources to hire support from qualified people. One principal declared:

I have got no money and no people to delegate to who are recognised by the Crown and I can't create them myself because I can't fund them. I have to make a conscious effort to keep my focus on teaching and on children. You know I could stay in here and do paperwork all the time and never get out of this office because there's enough work to do. (P1)

As she indicates, the range and complexity of management activities could easily absorb principals' attention and deflect them from what they all espoused, the leading of learning. While secondary schools have more ancillary assistance, their size means that it is easy for principals there to also be side-tracked or find it difficult to engage in curriculum and learning issues. All those interviewed acknowledged that technical management skills were an essential base. Their schools needed systems, efficient financial and property management, and accurate record keeping. But these must not deflect from wider leadership tasks.

Most principals in the study claimed that government policy was forcing them to become entrepreneurial, and resented how this shaped the way they interacted with sections of the community, particularly businesses. However, they needed to find money to equip their school with such essentials as computers without using grant and fee money. One principal had raised sufficient local funds to buy over 100 computers. This pressure challenged deeply held convictions about educational rights. Another reflected that the whole education system was shifting from a fully funded state one to a series of

public-private partnerships. The state system was no longer the one she had entered as a teacher and was less compatible with her own values of equity and egalitarianism. Her deeply engrained beliefs about the rights of children to a publicly funded education were undermined and she agonised about the decisions and compromises she and her Board made as they strove to provide what they considered the best learning conditions for their students. She was torn between what she believed to be the wider public good and the good of her school. For her, the wider context in which she operated had shifted dramatically.

The introduction of LMS in New Zealand built on assumptions about parental rights to choice of school for their children. Fiske and Ladd (2000) pointed to systemic issues of the resultant competition, its impact on school staffing, under and overused facilities and accommodation. They also noted the polarisation between schools perceived as desirable and others. This was counter to the New Zealand tradition that children attended their closest school. Government during the 1990s adopted the assumption espoused by Treasury that competition would guarantee quality; successful schools would prosper and others should be allowed to fail (Lauder, Hughes & Watson, 1999; The Treasury, 1987). This tested the egalitarian beliefs of several principals. One claimed that in spite of more recent government rhetoric about collaboration and sharing, LMS still makes each school an island. Seven of the sample principals had at some time inherited schools where the rolls were below capacity because of parental perceptions that their children would do better in schools with a higher decile rating. Their task was to persuade parents that their local school had the resources and skills to provide an effective education. In fact, most were able to increase their rolls significantly. But since school zones were often porous, if one school gained students, others lost them. One principal admitted there was a grey area, a 'bleeding fringe' (P1), between the core zones of her school and its neighbour, though she drew the line at poaching. This could make for uneasy relations even with close colleague principals. Another principal worried that though schools needed to respect their neighbours, they also needed to watch their own territory – after all, the continuing employment of staff depended on maintaining the roll.

Two principals faced serious moral tensions over parental choice and competition. One, the principal of a decile-one school with a high percentage of ethnic minority children, was forced to watch buses from five other schools drive along the street to pick up middle class students and take them away from their home district. His outrage at what he considered a lack of professional morality was strong and spurred his involvement in national union activities in support of equity for schools and pupils. He established a close association with the local university and he and his staff redoubled their efforts to build a school that raised community aspirations. Another principal faced the opposite dilemma. Parents beat a path to her door seeking to enrol their children in a school with fewer Māori students or because their children had experienced some difficulties in their current classes at other schools. Her policy was never to accept the out of zone students without counselling their parents to go back to their original school and try to work through the issue. She then rang her colleague principals to let them know what she had done. However, she recognised that, had her roll been less healthy, such principled behaviour may have been more difficult.

Alternative views of school purposes and leadership strategies

In spite of the competitive and performative climate in which their schools worked, most participants reacted positively when asked to respond to the assertion by Strike (2007) that schools could be 'communities that learn to live together well', encompassing and welcoming diversity. Building a community that genuinely learns to value diversity is challenging, as most communities build cohesion by defining a set of core beliefs that may serve to differentiate them from other groups. Strike's idea of community is a rich and holistic one, and calls into question the narrowness of some of the rhetoric around learning communities. It is not surprising that most of the study participants believed the concept could only be an aspiration, though eight were positive about the idea.

Several principals noted that they related to Strike's concept because for many children school may be the only real community to which they can belong. They believed fewer young people now accessed traditional groups such as churches, sports groups, community theatre, and this, coupled with the rise of new neighbourhoods without meeting places, had changed the face of towns and cities. The new social context put greater urgency on schools to compensate. One participant reported that even during the weekends children ran to his school as the one place they felt safe. Another noted the increased importance of the school in shaping values, since some parents dropped off their children early, collected them at 5 pm. and put them to bed by 7.30 pm. Yet at the same time, pressures to raise academic standards, raise roll numbers, seek external funding and introduce new curriculum made it difficult to maintain internal relationships and build a wider sense of professional community. Day to day realities brought pragmatism. They expressed cynicism about some recent educational rhetoric about learning communities and suggested that less talk of transformation and more about continuity might serve pupils better.

While they did not believe there were easy answers or leadership strategies that could be learned and applied, the principals identified knowledge, skills and dispositions needed by all principals to help them negotiate changing contexts. These included mutually respectful relationships and taking time to listen and understand. They also believed developing and maintaining a big picture of education was vital to prevent them from being captured by the purely local and to provide a critical framework. They resisted the notion of the principal as a key source of wisdom, stressing the importance of developing supportive but challenging professional networks inside and outside their schools. But several asked the question: Who cares for the principal?

CONCLUSION

Principals 'occupy a juncture between the school and beyond' (Lingard *et al.*, 2003, p. 138). They are both responsible for implementing government mandated policies and accountable to local Boards and groups of parents who may not understand or accept those policies. Thus, they operate in several contexts at the same time. They also bring to their roles a set of beliefs about the purposes of education and the roles of school leaders, developed from experiential and formal learning during their previous teaching and leadership roles. These beliefs and dispositions may be called into question by changing

national policy imperatives or by strongly held local conservatism, resulting in ethical and professional dilemmas.

Both local and national contexts impact on principal behaviour by affecting the parameters within which principals work. In this study, the national context impacted on all participants, forcing them over time to acquire new skills in finance, property and personnel management and introduced a competitive climate which made traditional inter-school cooperation more difficult. The business-oriented expectations of the 1990s remain but, in addition, over recent years MOE rhetoric has also focused on student achievement. Principals now feel pressured about the forms of academic accountability required. At the same time they have to operate in a local context shaped by community values and expectations, with varying staff and student mixes, levels of resourcing, and access to support.

Given that communities can easily become inward looking, and that the emphasis of LMS forces schools into forms of competition for students and achievement results, it is significant that none of these principals ignored the wider social context of New Zealand education. All spoke of their wider participation in education or recounted how they resisted, negotiated and evaluated policy. Thus, they demonstrated the 'ecological and political awareness' called for by Bottery (2004). Eight were actively engaged in policy development at local and national level and professed to share a vision for all schools, not just their own current context. Nevertheless, several illustrated a stance described by Hoyle and Wallace (2005) as ironic. They indicated that not only did local contexts often shape their behaviour as leaders but also that national policy and official educational discourse could be a source of tension and moral ambiguity, causing them to comply or play the game for the sake of their school.

The findings of the study endorse Hodgkinson's (1978) claim that the work of educational leaders interrelates technical competence and moral complexity. All the principals regarded relationships, dealing with moral ambiguities and a range of external accountabilities as the stuff of their daily practice, but they were also adamant that technical management skills were an essential base. Nevertheless, their resilience in a complex and difficult job came from an espoused commitment to the importance of education to the life chances of their students. They all believed that their work could contribute to social justice.

The principals' sense of personal agency was based on a commitment to students that went far beyond formal accountability for academic achievement. Their unhappiness over the perceived low trust national professional context in which they worked may well have stemmed from this inner accountability. One summed this up in a memorable quote:

The first day I was principal I turned up there and I'd met the staff obviously. There were only five of us and the nine o'clock bell went and we all went to our rooms and then at lunchtime the bell went and the children went outside and they all sat outside their classrooms on those seats and ate their lunch in a long line. It was my first lunchtime as principal and I went out and I walked along the seats saying 'Hello' – because they all knew who the principal was – and I'm smiling and walking along there.

That's one of the days that changed my life in teaching. I looked at these kids and I thought, 'Good god, they all get up in the morning, they all come to this school, this is their school and I'm their principal. I had better know what I'm doing.' And I've never got over that. (P5)

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