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Keeping things on track: School principals as managers

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Abstract:

Literature about education in New Zealand and internationally over the past 30 years has increasingly focused on the need for effective school leadership. In New Zealand a major Best Evidence Synthesis study (BES, 2009) led to an emphasis on instructional leadership aimed at raising achievement. This emphasis has tended to undervalue management as less important, linked to the status quo rather than change and improvement. However, extended interviews with rural primary principals revealed they saw management as crucial to responding to parental concerns, handling disruption, and keeping the school ‘on track’. Making use of local knowledge and taking advice, they held the core responsibility for an observable response. These principals believed that managing issues helped them build and sustain the trust of the school community, which was of value ‘next time’. Thus, aspects of management combine the relational and context-dependent work of school principals. Drawing on Mintzberg (1990) we argue that the recognition and valuing of management aspect of school leadership is crucial for principal effectiveness.

Keywords: management, school principals, community expectations, disruption

Introduction

In New Zealand, a Labour-led coalition became government in October 2017, and initiated advisory groups, reviews and consultation with potentially significant and extensive change/re-vision of school governance and operation. Since 1990, the focus has been on a policy with a competitive ‘market’ approach to education and self-managing schools. A concern over inequalities in student achievement led to an emphasis on instructional leadership aimed at raising educational outcomes. This emphasis has tended to undervalue management as less important, linked to the status quo rather than change and improvement. However, extended interviews with rural primary principals revealed they saw management as crucial to

responding to parental concerns, handling disruption, and keeping the school ‘on track’.

Making use of local knowledge and taking advice, they held the core responsibility for a visibly active response. These principals believed that managing issues helped them build and sustain the trust of the school community, which was of value ‘next time’. Thus, aspects of management combine the relational and context-dependent work of school principals.

Drawing on Mintzberg (1990) we argue that the recognition and valuing of management aspects of school leadership is crucial for principal effectiveness.

Context and nature of school leadership in New Zealand

The implementation, in the 1990s, of *Tomorrow’s Schools* (1989), a government policy for major systemic change, brought significant and extensive shifts in how schools operate and to the nature of the work of school leaders in New Zealand. A factor in this change was the increase in parents’ expectations of schools and of the influence/power of the school community over school operations in all aspects including curriculum, financial management of resources, and staff. *Tomorrow’s Schools* changed the way parents and community members (‘the public’) think about education (Devine, Stewart & Benade, 2018) introducing a relationship of economic exchange of ‘goods and services’ between schools and their client or consumers, children and parents. That the nature of principalship changed significantly in breadth and complexity under *Tomorrow’s Schools* has been well documented (Alcorn, 2011; Gronn, 2003; Smyth, 2011; Wylie, 2012). These changes impacted with particular intensity on principals in rural settings, in schools with small staffs and distant from professional support agencies.

Academics and policy makers have searched internationally for models for effective and successful school principalship (e.g. Burns, 1998; Duignan, 2002; Grissom and Loeb, 2011;

Leithwood, Day Sammons & Hopkins, 2006). Almost all these models focus on the word leadership: transformational leadership, servant leadership, values-led leadership, ethical leadership, and instructional leadership. Eacott (2015) refers to this as *adjectival leadership*. Kegan and Lahey (2009) asserted that educational leadership literature is ‘overloaded’ in the area of what effective and successful leadership might look like in terms of a defining style or model.

At the same time there was intense interest in raising educational achievement, driven by results in international surveys. In New Zealand, there was concern about falling scores and the gap between low and high achieving students. The impact of this issue on school leadership became an urgent focus, leading to the commissioning by the Ministry of Education of a best evidence synthesis (BES). The resulting publication, *School leadership and Student Outcomes* (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009) has been highly influential over the past decade. Subtitled *Identifying what works and why*, it focused on instructional or pedagogical leadership as key to close the achievement gap.

In the literature leadership is often contrasted with management (Leithwood, Day, Sammons & Hopkins, 2006). Leadership is seen about vision, improvement, and change, while management is about maintaining the status quo. The BES takes a nuanced approach.

In addition to challenging others to change particular practices, a leader may need to challenge them to reconsider their views about what does and does not need changing. Based on this association between leadership and change, we can draw a distinction between leading and managing. Managing is about maintaining operations and routines:

leadership is about garnering support for their reconsideration and possible change (2009, p. 68).

One of the tasks of an instructional leader, according to the study, is to ensure an orderly and supportive environment “by means of clear and consistently enforced social expectations and discipline codes” (p. 43). Such an environment allows teachers to concentrate on their work without interruption and protects them from educational officialdom and parental interference.

In this article, we wish to rebalance researcher and practitioner attention on leadership in the work of school principals with attention to the significance of management. It is not new to suggest that leading and managing are both important (Yukl & Lepsinger, 2005). Rather than separate leadership from management we wish to promote recognition of the importance of the role of manager in the work of school principals. Mintzberg, commenting on the nature of managerial work, rejects heroic leadership and suggests that managers are decision-makers, facilitators, builders of culture, analysts and doers: “An effective manager achieves a dynamic balance among all of these elements” (2010, p. 32). Mintzberg identified ten management roles, one of which is leadership. He divided what he observed managers doing into interpersonal, informational, interpersonal, and decisional categories. Mintzberg claims that “managing takes place on three planes, from the conceptual to the concrete: with information, through people, and to action directly” (2010, p. 31). Following Mintzberg, the principals interviewed for this study asserted that managing the issues that arose in their school and community helped them develop keener professional judgment and confidence.

Using stories from interviews with rural primary principals, conducted as part of a doctoral study by the first author, we illustrate management as crucial in responding to parental concerns, handling disruption, and with keeping the school on an even keel.

The study

The evidence presented in this paper comes from previous research (Earl Rinehart, 2017) using a qualitative methodology. Principals of small rural schools—three women and three men—were interviewed three times over 18 months. This original research focused on the *judgment* of principals' work. In this paper we are examining evidence from that study as illustrations of the nature of principals' work.

Although rural principals face the same regulatory and operational complexities in their work as their urban counterparts, these typically smaller, community-based rural schools enable a focus on principals' work because:

- principals in small schools tend to be more 'visible' and, including out-of-school activities, they typically have more contact with parents and community members.
- fewer staff means fewer layers of responsibility without a 'senior management team'. Principals in these schools tend to be directly involved in all school operations and issues.
- there are a limited number of colleagues readily available for professional conversations about issues, plans and decisions impacting on informal learning.

In short, the expectations, decision-making and responsibilities of school principals are concentrated in the work of a principal of a small rural school.

Interview transcripts were analysed and narrative research stories developed as representations of the evidence. These research stories have been reviewed and re-analysed for this paper.

(Re)Analysis

According to Denzin (2015), “data are not things that can be collected, coded or analysed; data are processes constructed by researcher’s interpretive practices” (p. 202). He said:

language and speech do not mirror experience. They create experience, and in the process transform and defer that which is being described. Meanings are always in motion, incomplete, partial, contradictory. There can never be a final, accurate, complete representation of a thing, an utterance, or an action. There are only different representations of different representations. (2015, p. 200)

The stories presented here have been re-analysed using abductive methods (Brinkmann, 2014). For Brinkmann, abduction is not driven by theory or empirical evidence “but by astonishment, mystery, and breakdowns in one’s understanding” (2014, p. 722). Abduction is an ongoing process requiring immersion with material. The stories used here are of principals’ experiences of incidents. We analysed these stories as exemplars to elucidate the nature of school principal work actions and relationships. We were interested in how principals made decisions, information they used, and what support they used (e.g., regulations and policy guidance, official networks). We also asked: what impact do expectations of parents and community members have on principal decision making and actions and how might these experiences influence principals?

Decisions regarding the presentation of evidence

The use of literary forms in qualitative research can be traced back to the crisis of representation (1986-1990) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). At that time scholars began

questioning the place of researcher in research texts and the relationship between researcher and participants. Denzin and Lincoln proposed that, ‘the narrative turn’, “a concern for storytelling and composing ethnographies in new ways” (2005, p. 3), in part, defined what these authors identify as the post-modern (1990-1995) and post-experimental (1995-2000) periods.

Decisions regarding the representation of the evidence as research stories in this piece were strategic (St Pierre, 2013, Richardson, 1994). To make the researcher’s role in crafting the presentation of participants words obvious and to, as Eisner put it, draw “attention to complexity, feeling, and new ways of seeing” (1997, p. 29). Stories convey a sense of the individual experience and humanity through personal voice (words, tone, diction). Stories, like poems, have the power to capture reader attention to connect emotionally as one person to another and that connection helps convey the message, theoretical or practical. This form has “been chosen for their unique qualities for communicating about research” (Finley, 2003, p. 283). Through narrative inquiry, arts-based research, indigenous methodologies, and through autoethnography the telling of research stories has ‘made real’ public issues.

These stories are a retelling of anecdotes told to the first author and have been edited to keep the believability of what occurred without certain specifics. Denzin terms this form of realism ‘verisimilitude’ (Denzin, 1994) and suggests this as a basis for judging the quality of this writing: is the work life-like and believable? Can the reader/audience imagine this occurring? Each story is edited from a particular principal’s words, although, any one of them could have told these stories because they all suggested these kinds of occurrences ‘happen in every school’. By using research stories, we seek to generalise experiences while retaining the ‘truths’ of each story.

The research stories were crafted using a four-step process.

1. Participants stories of instances were identified in the transcripts that held illustrations of key points arising from analysis
2. Versions of, partial references, and fragments from across the three interviews told by participants were collated to tell a story of the event using principals' own words.
3. These draft stories were revised several time using a literary edit (for meaning, flow, presence of story arc-beginning, middle, and end).
4. Finally, a review on ethical, research and literary grounds.
 - a. To ensure the story holds the *truths* of the original as told by the participant (facts, sequence of events, significance or felt weight of different aspects for principal, actions and consequences);
 - b. To ensure the story, as evidence, represents the key ideas from analysis that the researcher is seeking to communicate; and
 - c. To consider if the story communicates a 'satisfying' story.

These principals' stories of incidents and how they were resolved, or not, reveal the expectations of primary principals held by parents and members of the school community. They also illustrate how incidents or disturbances impact on principal's work and activities and how this experience and reflecting on what happened contributes to principal professional learning. We ask that the reader engage with these principals and their situation through these three stories.

Evidence in stories

The principal in this first story faces an accusation that a child was hurt at school. The parent expects, whatever happened, the culprits would be identified, and steps taken to ensure it

would not happen again. The responsibility for finding out what had happened and taking appropriate action is seen to rest with the principal. A concern for the principal is that questions might arise (and spread) regarding the school as a safe environment. This principal talked to a range of people in seeking to establish what happened, while, for the parent, time goes by with no obvious progress made. Being dissatisfied this parent contacts the police.

Playgrounds, buses and the police

The parents are largely one hundred per cent behind the school. There are just one or two incidents that occur from time to time, and they happen in every school, that we just have to manage. We had an email overnight from a parent. Out of the blue, a student had gone home with some pretty serious marks on their body that the student alleged had occurred at school. He basically claimed he was assaulted by other students. Because of the experience of the playground duty staff on that day and where he alleged it had happened we doubted this story. That took some time –interviewing all the students and crosschecking people's stories. The Public Health Nurse became involved and checked out the injuries for us. As we investigated, however, the student's story kept changing. The first change was no, it didn't happen at school, it happened on the bus. The bus story took a bit of elimination, to talk to the bus driver, to talk to the bus wardens, to talk to other students on the bus. The third story was that two outsiders had come onto the school grounds during the day and assaulted this student. Which again, we had serious doubts about given the description of these guys - covered in tattoos, spiky hair and missing fingers. Still, we had to make sure that everything was done procedurally correctly. Our investigation was taking too much time for the parent, who took the complaint to the police. They began an investigation and Child, Youth and Family became involved. This incident just kept spiralling. We were frantically trying to get to the bottom of what happened. In the end we really didn't. The police

investigated. We got a phone call from Child, Youth and Family, from the office of the Commissioner of Children and from the local police. They found no case to answer and couldn't give any explanation as to how the child got these marks. It took a long time to get to that point and the parent backed the child and was convinced that something had happened at school. Given the nature of our school, someone would have known, and they would have spoken up. The board have the ultimate responsibility for the health and welfare of children, so where did the board come into it?

The parent of the child concerned informed the school principal that something had happened. The principal's local knowledge meant there were doubts that such an event could occur without anyone else knowing about it. Considerable principal's time and effort to gather information and advice involved interactions with students, school staff, and outside agencies in increasing wider circles. Procedures involved regular communication between principal and the school's board of trustees' chairperson, and keeping written records. Ever present was the potential for broader disruption/unsettling of the parents' and the community's view of this school. In this situation the police and the 'Child Youth and Family' organisation¹ cleared the school of having a case to answer. In the end, despite the principal's efforts who, or what, caused the child's bruising remained a mystery. This story illustrates that not everything brought to a principal's attention can be, or will be, resolved to everyone's satisfaction. The parent would not necessarily be satisfied having continued to support the child's accusations despite increasingly inventive versions of 'what happened'.

¹ The Child Youth and Family (CYF), founded in 1999, was the NZ government agency with legal powers to intervene in order to protect and help children who are being abused, neglected, or who have problem behaviour. It was replaced by a new Ministry for Vulnerable Children in April 2017 and then the Oranga Tamariki- Ministry for Children in 2018 after a change of Government.

Principals can be alerted to something that they had previously not been aware of through serendipitous events and the willingness of a parent or other community member to share the information. The next story, *Backseats and informants* illustrates the indirect nature of alerts a principal might receive and the importance of being informed for a timely response. Potential for damage to the school's reputation is apparent in this story as it seems the community quickly knows of the incident compared with the first story, where it appears that there was no incident for parents to talk about.

Backseats and informants

Earlier this year we had an eight-year-old boy who brought some marijuana to school and who thought it would be a nice idea to share it with his friends. We found out because one kid who wasn't involved, was talking to his brother about it in the back of the car and mum's ears pricked up. She alerted us to it. So, at that time the question going around the parents was: what is going on at that school that 8-year olds are bringing marijuana into the school?

I got out our school police liaison officer from town and we had this parent meeting. The parent community wanted to go straight into punitive punishment. Our police liaison officer was saying to the parents this is about kids being able to come to you and talk about these things. As a school staff, we kept trying to say 'it is not that it won't happen, it is what we do about it that matters. There has been support for this approach from our board chair as a result of board of trustees' training on 'safe proceeding'. The board chair has said that parents have to take some responsibility and you can't just lay the blame on the school's doorstep. That was one of those big things, or potentially big things, that worked out reasonably well over a relatively short period of time.

This principal acted to bring parents' questions, speculation, and concerns into the open and to reinforce a shared responsibility between parents and school staff for children's actions at school. In calling such a meeting, s/he expressed confidence in their own knowledge of, and relationship with, the police liaison officer, school staff, the board chair (and board training) and the parents in the school community. The parents were better informed and, perhaps, more cohesive in their understanding as a result of this meeting.

This third story takes place over a longer period than the previous two. Seeking to address all students' needs the principal initiates his or her least-favoured option for one child, the decision to officially 'stand down' that student for violent behaviour. The principal described this decision as "a big step. It's a big step for the kid, a huge step for the family, because he's now got that black mark forever." In their small rural school this child's behavior was atypical. As far as the principal could recall no child had never been 'stood down' at this school before: "it was a proper Section 27, 'take your child away until we get something in place'".

Standing up and standing down

We've got one boy. He came from town - he'd made a lot of progress but he started getting violent. [T]he Ministry way –you've got to work through Resource Teacher for Learning and Behaviour, work through the Ministry, and work through Special Education. That's extremely time consuming, endless meetings, endless amounts of paperwork to read. We could spend our whole lives writing reports and continuing observations and things like that. It's very, very frustrating in schools where you just don't have the time or energy to keep pursuing these people. My board chairman is very aware of that, because I keep him in the loop. I copy him in on the crafty letters that I write and we have lots of informal discussion. So, he's more than aware.

We battled the Ministry last year to get some instant help, a couple of bits of interim funding, which we got. We've found our own teacher aide. And we found our own clinical psychologist that we are paying for to work with this boy. But that's important for that kid and that family. We're now trying to say, 'We're going forward. What are we going to do to support this boy?'

In fact, the advice I've been given by professional colleagues, Special Ed, and the Ministry has said that the orange light goes on when we suspend him, and the red light goes on in Wellington when we exclude him. And they directly phone [the regional ministry office] and they will ring my door and say, 'What are you doing? You've just excluded a boy.' And I'll say, 'Well, can we have some money now?' And they go, 'Okay, we'll give you some support as long as you take him back.' What we were trying to do is get support and advice for a kid without doing that kind of thing. I can see the frustrations people have on a daily basis with the classroom situation.

He threw something and it hit a girl on the head. ... Well, we said we're just not having it, because a] the whole school knew and the whole community knew within five minutes because all the parents were talking on Facebook about it. We've got to keep the community positive in that sense knowing that the kids are in the right place for the right reasons and they're being looked after. I feel sorry for this boy, it's not a learning issue, it's a behavioural / mental health issue.

We stood him down. This is uncharted territory for me. So, we make a couple of calls to more experienced principals, we go and visit a couple of people. I spoke to my senior advisor at the Ministry, and said, 'Look, am I over-reacting? Is it reasonable to do this in these circumstances?' And they all said, 'No, we're surprised that you've taken that long'. So, we took that action and it's actually worked like a charm, because the family came in for the Return to School meeting, everything was fine. They finally twigged that

there was something wrong. There was an element of crisis, but then the action taken, has set us on the road to solving that problem. We make the wrong decision sometimes and we just deal with that and try and fix things up. But this was one occasion where we had to make a big decision – and it was the right one. We didn't do it lightly and we did it carefully.

In this story what was being dealt with by the principal and teachers escalates over time through ongoing frustration at accessing official—but non-emergency—resourcing, and when parents start to talk on social media. The story switches between the ‘I’ of the principal’s actions and decisions and the ‘we’ of the (officially) shared responsibility with the board of trustees. You can still hear the lingering question, ‘was it for the best?’ This principal, however, becomes surer of ‘the school’s’ decision to ‘stand up’ and ‘make the call’ as the story is repeated—a form of reflection—as well as a strengthening of confidence through review.

It is the school principal who is viewed by parents as *the person* responsible for everything that happens at school. Principals are expected to respond in careful, timely and transparent ways to resolve any concerns or issues raised by the parent community, and to have the resources to do so. In the stories above each principal used the pronoun ‘we’ but invariably each meant themselves, while keeping others, like the board of trustees’ chairperson, informed.

The principals in the study rely on their networks of parent informants, agency personnel and professional contacts for information, advice and support. It is important they are seen to do the ‘right’ thing, while at the same time there is an acceptance of uncertainty and flexibility in their approach. Rather than having a specific goal in mind and executing ‘a plan’ they make

decisions in a step-by-step manner taking thoughtful actions to move forward reassessing and negotiating perceived risks as they proceed.

Parental support for the school, and the school's reputation are at stake when disruptions occur. In the first story the parent's concern remained unresolved while other stakeholders, including the school, closed their 'investigations'. The second incident was resolved very positively and over a relatively short period of time. In the third story, progress has been made toward workable processes to ensure the child's ongoing support to learn at school. These principals respond with attention to both the current concern and what they see as "the bigger picture" to "nip things in the bud" and "keep things on track". Principal local knowledge, confidence and management skills grow through these school specific but widely experienced challenges.

Discussion

As presented here, principals' stories of work illustrate their responsiveness to parental concerns and their level of responsibility. Disruption to planned work often comes 'out of the blue' and handling any disruption requires principals to interact with a number of individuals and groups as they seek to keep the school 'on track'.

Responding to parental concerns

Parents expect school principals to respond to their concerns promptly and with decisions that result in observable action. The stories about bruises and shared marijuana reflect parental concern for children's safety at school: one, an accusation of physical violence against an individual; the second, the danger of their children encountering drugs. Prompted by an alert or event that cannot be ignored, principals take steps to reassure parents.

Reaching a resolution can take a lot of time. For teaching principals, getting cover for their teaching was often required. Getting good information and guidance in a timely manner from dependable sources, keeping key interested parties—and those legally concerned—informed, along with keeping good records for accountability were mentioned as part of these principals' responses to parents' concerns. Dealing with each issue took considerable amounts of these principals' time. Time and effort was taken from planned activities to be focused on teaching and learning as well as required administrative tasks. This is time which could have been spent on curriculum and teacher professional development. In this way, any concerns immediately and significantly impact on principal work from what they had planned to do to putting in their time and effort responding to and, hopefully, resolving the concern or issue.

The nature of their responses was referred to by these principals as finding “ways forward” and “putting out fires”. There was no sense of a master plan or of them having an intended sequence of actions developed early on. Mintzberg (1990) characterised that managers made decisions beyond the use of any checklist or flowchart. Even with procedures in place—such as duty teachers and bus monitors in the story of the child with unexplained bruises—parents can have their confidence shaken; doubts and fears may arise from what their child says about school.

Each incident had the potential to disrupt school programmes, and unsettle parent and community trust in staff and support of the school. Principals sought to remedy or resolve the ‘threat’ to routine school operations, as well as to the school’s reputation. The principals in these stories were strongly motivated to avoid escalation of community concerns, which

would impact on school reputation. They saw concerns escalating when they became the subject of mainstream and social media and involved agencies beyond those involved in the local school community. Without community support for the school, parents can withdraw their children to enrol them somewhere else with direct implications for the current school's staffing and funding.

Parents assume that principals are responsible for everything that happens in school. This expectation of principals is mirrored in Ministry of Education policy documents. The New Zealand Kiwi Leadership for Principals framework (KLP), for example, states: principals are “ultimately responsible for day-to-day management of *everything* that happens in their schools” [emphasis added](MoE, 2008, p. 7). While this includes the articulation of school vision and values, it also declares that a core role of principals is the managing of day-to-day happenings. The principals in this study also held themselves responsible.

Handling disruption

The stories above illustrate that the smooth running of the school can be disrupted by the unpredictable. Managing disruption involves handling alerts any time and skill in an on-going ‘reading’ of the school community. Managing any disruptions involves principals in multiple interactions, some of them confidential. Conversations that hold information that cannot be shared publicly are part of principals’ work that goes on behind the scenes and contributes to their local knowledge. In these stories, principals drew on their local knowledge and learning from handling previous issues to guide their decision-making and actions in management of disruptions.

Managing is about awareness: noticing and recognising what is noticed as meaningful.

Educational leadership literature references such actions. Duignan (2012), an advocate of ethical leadership, wrote of principals' 'reading' and 'evaluating' situations in order to modify their actions (he uses the term 'behaviour'). Eisner's (1976) concept of connoisseurship, refers to the qualities of openness, sensitivity, and appreciation for difference in deliberations that involve evaluation—of a situation, for example. How the qualities of a situation are described, interpreted and evaluated may also vary (Eisner, 1976). Noticing and recognising, reading and evaluating, are in all four diagnostic leadership tasks identified by Heifetz and Linksy (2002) as being involved when school leaders respond:

1. Distinguishing between technical and adaptive challenges;
2. Determining where people stand in relation to relevant deeply felt issues;
3. Understanding underlying meaning of the comments of others (interpretation); and
4. Paying attention to the behaviour (clues) of those in authority.

Heifetz and Linksy's diagnostic leadership tasks align well with Mintzberg's understanding of management. Mintzberg (1990) would include 'reading' a situation under his management activity of *handling a disturbance* and the KLP (MoE, 2008) would place these aspects under *problem-solving*. Whether school principals are comfortable with defining concerns of parents and children as 'problems' to be solved or not, we suggest reading people and situations as keys to managing disruption.

What actions principals feel they have open to them are, in many ways, linked to the nature of the relationships they have with members of the school community—including parents and teachers, as well as external authorities. They have to gather information through consulting others, such as duty teachers and students who were there in the playground or on the bus, and potential witnesses, on the day a young boy claimed to have been beaten. Along with teachers, the board of trustees is also involved to varying degrees. The principal in the

Playground case described a sense of urgency and had interactions with a large number of individuals and groups.

These interactions were sometimes a single brief conversation and other times sustained regular contact over a period. Mintzberg writes of the manager working at (“an unrelenting”) pace with their activities being characterised by *ad hoc* verbal contacts (“brevity, variety, and discontinuity”, 1990, p. 164) and practices that encourage the flow of information. A principal’s relationship with relevant staff of external agencies also helps in such situations. The incident in *Backseats and informants* became a focus for wider community concern and the principal’s response involved the expertise of the police liaison officer and calling a school community meeting. The *Playgrounds, buses and the police* story involved external agencies in the effort to find out what exactly happened. In *Standing up and standing down*, external agencies were contacted for any formal support they could provide for a child exhibiting violent behaviour.

A part of principal work that goes on behind the scenes and is in tension with a school leader’s need to be transparent about decision-making, includes conversations that hold information that cannot be shared publicly. Mintzberg’s (1990) description of the manager’s role mentions being privy to behind the scenes information, including other peoples’ confidences. As he put it, “much of it available only to them because of their status” p. 46). In all three stories, what was hidden from others was significant to principals. Principal’s keep confidences and hold “privileged” information about individuals and families. As often the only person with this combination of information, they are on their own and may struggle with being seen as transparent and open in communication of their decision processes.

In dealing with the unexpected, these principals were adamant that knowledge of local context was imperative. While incidents could occur in any school, developing understanding of community-specific expectations was essential. The application of local knowledge in principal decision-making in the stories presented here is not simply technical problem-solving according to standardised regulatory or policy guidelines. The issues are not solely educational issues of student learning. In managing these situations, the school principal makes decisions using the school context: knowledge of the nature of the school, the school community, the people involved, and themselves.

In order to sustain the school's momentum—regarding a sense of direction for educational improvement and ongoing student learning—principals need to deal with disruptions. What is unsettled needs to be settled again. Stability in schools provides levels of trust and confidence in school leaders from the school community that support learning and growth, for students, for the school and for the principal. In this study a high degree of trust allowed a principal more time to get advice and to react in a well-considered and confident way. They all took extra care when they perceived they could afford to take the time, often engaging in extensive research (gathering information) and deliberation (seeking and considering advice) to determine any 'next step'.

Keeping the school 'on track'

Participants in the study believed their role was to 'keep on track', maintain 'an even keel' and restore stability by dealing with unexpected challenges, which would impact on children's learning. When faced with the next incident to manage, principals drew on their learning from previous experience in handling disruption.

Instead of being planned and guided by policy, managing disruption saw these principals dropping what had been planned for decision-making and actions taken step-by-step. Rather than being characterised as evidence-based decision making (using affordances of technology), these stories show principals using their connections and local knowledge in predominantly face-to face interactions. Compared with a drive for ongoing change, these principals prioritised maintaining a sense of stability in the nature of the school's reputation, and sustaining levels of parental and community trust and confidence in the school leader and the school. This stability, trust and confidence would provide the 'everyday' circumstances for teaching and learning, and the platform for ongoing improvement.

Faced with a new incident the principals in these stories drew on learning from the successful handling of previous situations. Reflecting on these incidents—such as the belief of a parent that her son had been attacked at school—or dealing with unfamiliar situations in the classroom—such as the enrolment of a student with particularly disruptive behaviour and high learning needs—the principals believed they had learned from handling these situations. They expressed that their learning from successful handling of incidents developed their professional judgment and also, that these 'successes' built and sustained the trust and confidence they felt afforded by school and community members.

Dewey's (1938) understanding of learning from experience involves interpretation, deliberation, and the development of one's judgment. Duke (2018) suggests that judgment is one of the key components of leadership but that it is seldom addressed in leadership courses. He defines judgment as 'the ability to arrive at and make a choice when faced with incomplete information, uncertain conditions, and/or competing goals or values. This conception clearly associates judgment with non-routine choices' (p. 10). Each time an unexpected situation arises principals can draw on an increasing reservoir of experience (and

experiential knowledge). In Duke's terms, principal thereby became experts focused on school and students.

Stability and management are not typically valued. Leithwood, Day, Sammons and Hopkins (2006) appear to undervalue the importance of stability, noting that 'stability is the goal of what is often called management. Improvement is the goal of leadership' (p. 11). However, Morris (2014) notes that 'it is difficult to initiate improvement from an unstable foundation' (p.4). Grissom and Loeb (2011) caution that instructional leadership is most effective when combined with organisational management. They quote other scholars (Murphy 1988, Stronge (1993) Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu and Easton (2010) who see the dichotomy between instructional leadership and management as a false one.

We want to differentiate between managing and managerialism, at least as Thrupp and Wilmott (2003) describe managerialism as being largely confined to policy implementation (followership to policy makers) and technical problem-solving at the school level.

Consequently, a managerialist approach, these authors argue, reinforces existing inequalities and builds "inequitable, reductionist and inauthentic" schools (2012, p. 4). The connotations of managerialism are largely negative but to undervalue 'managing' in principalship would, we suggest, overlook or ignore significant aspects of school principals' (daily) work.

Thrupp and Wilmott (2012) contrast *problem-solving* perspectives with *critical* perspectives in terms of answers to educational purposes and problems. In this article we are in neither camp. We focused here on situations that 'happen in every school' that disrupt routines and which have the potential to escalate and undermine community confidence in the principal and in the school. We do not frame these situations as problems but as incidents or issues

that are responded to rather than solved. Action is taken and the circumstances change to allow the school to move forward again “on track”. The episodes in these stories do reflect broader educational, societal, historical, cultural and political trends but instead of decision-making by the policy, checklist, flow chart or ‘common sense’, we would characterise a school principal’s relational and school-specific exercise of professional judgment in response, as *managing*.

Conclusion

The stories presented here alert us to the unpredictable nature of the environment in which school principals work. As in *Backseats and informants*, a chance remark by a child in the back seat of a car going home from school could be picked up by a parent and lead to shared concern amongst members of the school community. Once notified by the parent the principal saw they needed to act quickly to stop the spread of anxiety and rumour. The final outcome encompassed community and parent understanding and acknowledgement of shared responsibility. While it is widely accepted in literature on leadership and management that change needs to be constant, the unpredictability that leads to change described here is different from those curriculum and pedagogical changes often mandated in New Zealand by the MoE.

In this article we present stories of what principals in Earl Rinehart’s study (2017) *do* and some of the situations they had to deal with. There is tension in leadership literature between critical and instrumental approaches to how we talk about and value what principals *do*. Managing is usually referred to in educational leadership literature as dealing with the routine in order to maintain the status-quo. In contrast, the principals in these stories have

responsibility to handle the non-routine, the out of the ordinary, the unfortunate and the suspicious, which can be disruptive to and promotional of learning. Such situations have the potential to stimulate questions around the school as a safe environment, undermine parent and community trust and confidence in the principal and the school, but at the same time can develop parents' knowledge and understanding, children's social competencies, and a principal's professional judgment.

The experience of the six principals in Earl Rinehart's study leads us to argue for a more positive emphasis on management as an integral part of leadership for primary school principals. Like Mintzberg's (1990) managers, who constantly scanned the environment in apparently brief and fragmentary activities, the information gained (official and confidential) allowed the principals in this study to plan and act. Learning from disruption—for principals, parents, teachers and students—can result in positive long-term outcomes.

It is both important, and expected, that a school principal will stabilise an unsettled situation, and reassure and maintain parent and community support. Given principals cannot avoid dealing with issues that arise should we not accept this as inevitable and help principals handle these situations and develop their professional judgment? Those involved in preparing, supporting and appraising principals need to acknowledge the time, effort and professional skills required by principals as school leaders in ensuring the school is 'well-run' and 'on track'. Then, we can seek further ways to help people in this position develop sources of support and advice, capability in decision-making, and their professional judgment from such experiences. We argue, drawing on Mintzberg's work, that it is management that links the relational aspects and context-dependent work of primary school

principals. We see the recognition and valuing of the management aspect of school leadership as crucial for principal success in enhancing student and teacher learning.

We leave the last word to one of the school principals, who when asked, “So, a successful principal in your mind? A successful principal is?” responded:

Many things. Many, many things. Depending on your school, you've got to be able to build a team, maintain a supportive community, have a sort of an eye on the future but still be firmly rooted in the here and now to make things keep ticking over. And you've got to be a trouble shooter and a problem solver, see things coming. I mean it's endless, there's a whole raft of skills you've got to be. But at the end of the day, you've got to give kids the best opportunity to learn that you can, with the resources that you've got. And if something's getting in the way, you get rid of it.

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