

A Socially Contextualised Approach to Professional Learning for School Leaders

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ABSTRACT: Distinctive school contexts pose a challenge for professional learning for school leaders but this distinctiveness does not mean professional learning has to become entirely individualised. Schools with clusters of common contextual characteristics can provide a middle ground for professional learning between wholly generic versions of 'good practice' and wholly individualised ones. Yet because professional learning for school leadership has often been generic in its approach, these contextualised examples are generally not to the fore. It is often hard to work out which practices would be most appropriate for schools in particular social settings. This article describes the 'School leadership in context' courses, a New Zealand initiative that approached this problem by providing relatively targeted professional learning. The courses collected together the principals of small rural schools in particular geographic areas with the intention to provide a forum for discussion centred on the needs of 'like' schools facing a number of similar issues and problems, getting away from the one-size-fits-all approach that so often dominates professional learning offerings in New Zealand and elsewhere. The article discusses the political background to this professional learning and goes into considerations in providing the courses such as which groupings of school leaders to invite, and what the courses covered. The article also discusses some enduring challenges in providing professional learning centred on school context highlighted by the courses.

Introduction

The importance of school contexts for day-to-day practice in schools is widely recognised. Relevant search terms and euphemisms for general school contexts include disadvantaged schools and communities (Mills & Gale, 2009), schools in challenging circumstances (Smith & Bell, 2014), high-poverty schools (Stosich, 2016), middle-class schools (Thrupp & Lupton, 2011), elite schools (Prosser, 2018), urban schools (Beckett, 2016) and rural schools (Graham & Miller, 2015). Similarly the influence of school contexts on school leadership is also often discussed. It is highlighted variously in popular accounts (e.g. Kozol, 1991), general academic discussions (e.g. Angus, 2012; Braun et al., 2011; Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2015a; Eacott, 2018; Thrupp & Lupton, 2006) and detailed research (e.g. Lupton & Thrupp, 2013; Smyth & McInerney, 2014). Both the 'International Successful School Principalship Project' (e.g. Day & Gurr, 2014) and the 'International School Leadership Development Network' (e.g. Angelle, Arlestig & Norberg, 2016) have a significant focus on school contexts. Many writers are concerned with school leadership in quite specific contexts (see for instance this special issue, also many of the contributors to Clarke & O'Donoghue 2015b). There are also more theoretical discussions of school context (Eacott, 2018; Oplatka, 2018).

Considering this corpus of work, I have a narrower working definition of what constitutes context than some. From my perspective, contextual differences may include ‘external’ dimensions such as pupil intake characteristics (class, ethnicity, turbulence, proportion of pupils from refugee families or with special needs) and school and area characteristics (location, local education policies, a school’s relationship to surrounding schools). What might be described as ‘internal contexts’ are also relevant. Historical factors within a school such as past leadership, past staffing provision, past resourcing and past reputation often weigh heavily on school leaders. But it is not clear to me that Braun and colleagues’ (2011) ‘professional contexts’ such as teacher commitments and policy management in schools or even some of what they call ‘material contexts’ such as staffing, budget or technology are best seen as contextual. These are all things that staff often do have a say over, whereas I regard contextual factors as those that are clearly not created by existing staff or reflective of their agency because they cannot be easily changed. From this perspective external and historical factors are contextual but most current internal issues are not contextual except those where a school’s leaders did not cause them and can do little except to respond. An example would be when a school gets badly damaged by flood or fire.

The reason I prefer this view of context, as the things school leaders cannot easily change, is that it encourages school leaders to recognise and be able to articulate when forces that shape their work are outside their control. In turn, this helps school leaders understand what is within their power to change and how they can best respond to contexts they cannot change. It is also useful for school leaders to understand that particular elements of context may be advantageous or disadvantageous to schools within a given policy framework and that deliberate adaptations are often made by teachers and school leaders in order to deal with school contexts. For instance there are often dramatic differences in pedagogical and management approaches in high and low socio-economic schools – lesson lengths, class sizes, ability groupings, additional learning support, behaviour and attendance management, pastoral care, extra-curricular activities; the list goes on.

A view of context as the things school leaders cannot easily change speaks back to the way policymakers around the globe have often sought to downplay context. They often want to put most responsibility for student achievement on teachers and school leaders, in a discursive move I refer to as the ‘politics of blame’. The politics of blame are where governments (or others) attempt to construct student or institutional ‘underperformance’ or ‘failure’ as the clear responsibility of schools and teachers. The politics of blame have often involved uncompromising stances on the part of politicians and policymakers where the quality of student achievement is seen as the result of school-based factors and any reference to wider contextual issues such as socio-economic factors are ruled out as excuses for poor performance. The net effect is to hold teachers and schools responsible for problems beyond their control, to make them into scapegoats. It diverts attention away from the responsibility of governments to address the effects of social inequalities, a much harder challenge.

I have been researching and writing about school context and the politics of blame for more than two decades. I began by asking whether New Zealand schools failing within educational markets were really ‘poor performers’ or just ‘plain poor’ (Thrupp, 1995). My early work on day-to-day processes in four New Zealand schools stressed the importance of being realistic about the ability of those working in low socio-economic schools to succeed against the odds (Thrupp, 1999). Studies of school contexts followed in both England (Lupton & Thrupp, 2013; Thrupp & Lupton, 2011) and New Zealand (Alcorn & Thrupp, 2012; Thrupp & Easter, 2013). It was hardly surprising then that once I was in some position to influence the professional learning of school leaders as discussed below, I was interested in looking at ways to both recognise context and push back on the politics of blame.

The politics of blame fit with the way that managerialist policies downplay social context. School leaders are often served up one-size-fits-all professional learning, which either assumes context is unimportant for the topic under discussion, or leaves school leaders to apply a general idea to the particularities of their own context. One reason for this approach could be because school leadership presenters and facilitators are drawing upon the managerialist frameworks for which the literature related to educational leadership and management has long been criticised (Thrupp & Willmott, 2003). For instance Lawrence Angus wrote in the 1990s of school effectiveness research, that '[f]amily background, social class, any notion of context are typically regarded as "noise" – as "outside" background factors which must be controlled for and then stripped away so that the researcher can concentrate on the important domain of school factors' (Angus, 1993, p. 341).

Another problem is that some school leadership presenters and facilitators may agree with the need to contextualise but view contextualised approaches to school leadership development as too hard. Given the sheer diversity of school contexts, the complexities are mind-boggling. Ruth Lupton and I have argued that a focus on schools with clusters of common contextual characteristics provides a useful middle ground between wholly generic versions of good practice and wholly individualised ones (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006). Applied to professional development, this suggests bringing together leaders of 'like' schools, while acknowledging that there will still be some important differences between them.

This article discusses the 'School leadership in context' courses, an intervention that colleagues and I undertook in New Zealand in 2016 that provided school leadership courses targeted at 'like' schools. I begin by describing how the courses were partly a way of responding to a national education policy development called 'Investing in Educational Success' which gave new importance to local 'Communities of Learning' that included many kinds of school types and intakes. I then discuss some more immediate purposes of the courses, considerations in providing them such as which groupings of school leaders to invite, and what the courses covered. The article also discusses some enduring challenges in providing professional learning centred on school context that are highlighted by the courses.

The Policy Background

The education policy background to the school leadership in context courses was an initiative announced in New Zealand in January 2014 called 'Investing in Educational Success'. This was a policy of the National-led Government, in power 2008-17, and was intended to set up clusters of primary and secondary schools across the country. These groupings became known as Communities of Learning (COLs) and came to include early childhood centres and a small number of tertiary education providers as well as schools. The clusters were intended to lift the quality of educational provision in New Zealand, would generally have a geographic focus and involved various new positions of teacher and principal leadership that would attract substantial additional salary.

The Investing in Educational Success policy caused initial consternation and longer-term controversy (see Thrupp, 2018). Although it was announced by Prime Minister John Key at a business leaders meeting and was clearly intended to kick off an election year, the idea seemed to have merit even for many of those opposed to neo-liberal shifts in New Zealand education. Putting schools into clusters seemed to be a move towards collaboration in a competitive system. On the other hand, Investing in Educational Success might increase control over a recalcitrant profession that had been contesting other policies such as the imposition of National Standards for primary assessment in New Zealand primary schools. Primary and secondary level teacher organisations had different responses to the Investing in Educational Success policy and the sector became split. Academics and researchers were also

quite polarised in their responses. By 2018 the Investing in Educational Success policy is in place but still yet to gather much momentum. Contestation by teachers made the 'implementation' of the policy much slower than the National-led Government expected but opened up some more favourable outcomes than would have been feasible under the original proposals (Thrupp, 2018).

One obvious problem the Investing in Educational Success policy raised from the standpoint of contextualised school policy and practice was the intention to develop local school clusters or COLs that included a very diverse range of schools, for instance schools with very different socio-economic and ethnic student intakes. While COLs might help to ease market competition in particular localities, there was also a risk of contextually inappropriate advice being promulgated by COL leaders, as they sought to apply similar practices across all schools within a COL. For instance, the principal of a school in a middle class community might end up providing advice to school leaders of a school serving a low socio-economic and ethnically diverse intake. There was great potential for 'teaching grandmother to suck eggs'.

I was concerned both about this development and by other announcements in September 2015 that the Ministry of Education's professional development was to become increasingly focused on '... a small number of national priorities in the areas of mathematics, science, reading and writing, digital fluency, and a pilot in health and PE' (Parata, 2015a). The Ministry would be driving this narrowed focus into the poorest and most remote regions in the country: 'Two of the priority regions will be Northland and Gisborne/East Coast which continue to have persistent education underachievement and poor employment outcomes for their young people' (Parata, 2015a).

While national achievement priorities were going to be pushed into the most vulnerable parts of New Zealand, it seemed that there was to be little recognition of local concerns and issues. Indeed New Zealand's then Minister of Education, Hekia Parata, liked to downplay socio-economic issues. She wrote in a November 2015 newspaper opinion piece entitled 'Socio-economic factors are often overstated':

What makes the biggest difference to a kid's education is something every kid and parent knows – the quality of the teaching in the classroom. Other critical variables are the quality of school leadership, parental engagement and community expectations (Parata, 2015b)

Parata had also made the following claim during Parliamentary debate the previous year:

New Zealand has a longstanding challenge of lifting those who are not succeeding in our education system, as shown in last year's Programme for International Student Assessment results. The analysis of those results showed that socio-economic status accounts for 18 percent of the differences seen in the student achievement data. That means that 82 percent are factors not about poverty. Decile is not destiny. (Hon. Hekia Parata, Answer in the House, January 29, 2014)

'Decile' here refers to socio-economic deciles used for compensatory funding which have become a marker of wealthier and poorer school intakes in New Zealand. The 18% claim was surprising, to say the least, but further investigation revealed it was based on PISA's narrow definition of family socio-economic influence. Using PISA's wider criteria that included neighbourhood and school socio-economic factors, about 78% of New Zealand's latest results became explained by socio-economic conditions (Thrupp, 2014).

Between the Investing in Educational Success policy, and the Minister's general denial of context and the way this perspective seemed to inform Ministry PLD for school leaders, the time seemed ripe for a more contextualised approach.

Developing the School Leadership in Context Courses

What makes the difference between what seems to be a good idea and actually doing something about it? The initial trigger for the school leadership in context courses was some unwanted professional learning offerings for school leaders in our region. A university from another region put out a flier inviting principals to attend courses that although expensive had only a generic flavour. This development invited some questioning of our own provision. There was a chance to try something new and I decided we should provide relatively targeted professional learning courses. For instance, the courses could collect together the principals of small rural schools serving dairy farming communities or the senior staff of schools serving ethnically diverse city schools.

My responsibility for educational leadership within our Faculty's management structure brought with it connections to professional development concerns, through the Faculty's Institute for Professional Learning, and through this I met Beth Dungey, an experienced professional development facilitator who became one of the team presenting the courses. Another Faculty colleague, Logan Moss, an educational historian, also joined the teaching team. Moss had for some time been teaching our initial teacher education students about inequalities between schools using Google Earth, along with social and educational statistics freely available from the New Zealand Government. He had built up a lot of expertise in using data to profile schools, but in ways which took account of the limits of such data and the underlying complexities. We realised this approach could also be used to begin discussion with school leaders about what was important about their contexts.

A further influence on proceeding with the courses was feedback from two presentations I gave about the proposed courses. One was an NZEI (New Zealand Educational Institute – education sector union) principals council meeting in Wellington in August 2015. The other was a symposium on 'School Leadership in Diverse Social Contexts' I organised at an Australian Association for Research in Education conference in Freemantle in December that year (Thrupp, 2015). Participants at both meetings were encouraging about such an intervention and how it might provide an alternative to the framing up of educational leadership through the COLs.

Planning and Running the Courses

The next step was to decide which contexts to focus on and which school leaders to invite. Inviting schools because they had a particular kind of context would be a key element of the new professional learning but to decide what would be sensible groupings and inviting the relevant schools was challenging. The issues needed to be self-evident enough for school leaders to read a paragraph and think that 'yes, that sounds like our school'. Our team began to consider possible groupings of schools that would be worthwhile to bring together and how those schools might be identified using publicly available data. As we looked more closely at possible groupings, different ways of thinking about context came to the fore. For instance some groupings were highly dispersed (e.g. 'special schools') while for others it was their particular regional location that was of interest. I was keen that it wouldn't only be socially disadvantaged schools (or schools with many 'priority learners' as they have become called in New Zealand) but rather schools in which some elements of context created a set of issues in common. For instance one context could be schools in high socio-economic suburbs with highly educated, demanding parents. The problems facing rural schools were also being highlighted in the media at the time (Callaghan, 2015).

We discussed the challenges facing small rural schools serving dairy farming communities, schools in the South Island high country, ethnically diverse schools, and schools

with rapidly increasing rolls, along with schools in particular regions such as the East Coast and Northland that had been highlighted by the Minister of Education. In the latter regional cases, there could be obvious differences between the schools but still value in collecting them all together because their fortunes are so intertwined (e.g. rural schools dependent on town schools as well as sharing problems in common (e.g. depopulation, isolation). This also raised the issue of inviting schools in some groupings that would be in competition with one another for students. It was not an easy problem to address except for being aware and sensitive to it.

When it came to the nature of the professional development, we thought the intent of the courses should be as much to provide a forum for discussion centred on the needs of 'like' schools facing similar issues and problems as to bring our own ideas to such schools. The 'School leadership in context' series could provide an opportunity for school leaders to collect their thoughts about what was really needed for their school and others like it. We decided the professional learning should start by using the social and educational data we could bring together to explain and discuss the initial contextual link while acknowledging differences between schools as well. The subsequent discussion would be focused on social, organisational and political issues in that context or viewed from that context. Although there would be academic input and facilitation from Dungey, Moss and I, a lot of the course would involve drawing out the experiences and expertise of the participants themselves as the people working each day in the context under discussion.

We decided to run the first day course in the King Country, a rural area about two hours drive from our university, affected by gradual depopulation and social deprivation. The second course was held in Northland, an area with a low socio-economic and predominantly Māori population, and one of the regions identified for intervention by the Minister of Education. In both cases we invited primary principals and/or others in primary senior leadership teams from every school in the area. We had 11 participants in the King Country and over 20 in Northland. We held the courses at a hotel in the heart of each area, charging a nominal fee to cover the venue and meals.

The two courses each had a different tone, reflecting local contexts and politics of education. In the King Country, we sensed suspicion of our motives and although we distanced ourselves from the Ministry of Education at the outset, it took a while before frank discussion of local issues and how they were being helped or hindered by government policy was achieved. In Northland, the course was promoted by Pat Newman, the president of the local principals' association. Newman was a well-known critic of any policies that might undermine public education (e.g. Newman, 2017) and, with his endorsement, we were probably more trusted to be sympathetic to local concerns. School leaders' views and frustrations in relation to local issues were more forthcoming at this Northland course.

As planned, each course started with a consideration of regional economic and social patterns, local demographic data and school growth and decline. There was discussion of related organisational matters such as school governance and Boards of Trustees, professional development, special education, transient students and families, and recruitment and retention of teachers. Lastly there was a focus on the interaction of local issues with education policy and wider social policy. Through all this we presented some material but also allowed discussion to linger on the topics of most interest to the participants. For instance those in the King Country were interested in new demands for housing, led by investors looking to capitalise on cheap real estate compared to elsewhere, and the effects of this on local families. In Northland a key concern was the perceived indifference of government agencies to the needs of local families, with school leaders involved in advocacy that went far beyond the school gate.

Learning From the Experience: Enduring Challenges in Contextualised Professional Learning

Looking back on the courses, and feedback from participants (informal emails as well as an online 'surveymonkey' questionnaire), it seems the courses achieved some useful purposes but not others.

First, the courses did reinforce a contextualised view of local educational matters, rather than generic perspectives, including on-message government discourses. Feedback indicated wide agreement that the discussion was worthwhile: '... would like to thank you for the day, it was very interesting. Lots of interesting discussions' said one Northland principal.

At the same time it was not clear that context was really being seen afresh as a result of the courses. To one King Country principal, '... we already knew most of the things that were discussed'. This highlights the problem of local issues being just the way things are, hidden in plain sight as educators become caught up within their context. Outstanding leadership may well be '... exquisitely sensitive to the context in which it is exercised' (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999, p. 3) but realising how one's context differs from another context is something else. This matters if we want school leaders to be able to articulate and advocate for resources to suit their context, or indeed avoid calling upon more than their share of resources. For instance leaders of high socio-economic New Zealand schools are often quick to argue that 'we have problems too' if there are suggestions of new compensatory funding or resources for schools in less well-off communities. It is true that high socio-economic schools have problems, and their leaders can find themselves under intense pressure at times, but the scale of social demands they face is not the same as in lower socio-economic settings. Perhaps getting a better understanding of context requires stepping out of it, not just in a token way, but for long enough to be able to see the constraints and possibilities in another setting and compare them to one's own. An exchange scheme that involved working in a quite different context that ran alongside the sorts of discussions held during the school leadership in context courses might achieve this goal of making the familiar strange.

Third, the feedback also indicated that for many participants, what was missing were 'next steps', 'action points', or 'solutions' that built on the analysis that had been developed. What could be achieved, with a greater understanding of context as discussed above, is a renewed sense of what can be done within a particular set of constraints and possibilities imposed by a particular context. Yet for many practitioners, the appeal of professional learning probably lies not in good analysis but in the hope of solutions. In lots of cases there were no easy solutions to the problems discussed. This meant that although participants would have come away with a renewed sense of problems shared, those problems may have seemed as intractable as ever.

Finally, no participant complained that their school had been missed by the contextual focus of the courses but it needs to be reiterated that the schools did vary in numerous respects as well as sharing much in common. It may be that in practice it is often difficult to bring together genuinely 'like' schools even in the same region or around the same issue. Judgements will always need to be made about whether it is useful to bring together any grouping of schools for professional learning purposes. Becoming well acquainted with the differences between schools as well as any obvious similarities would seem to be crucial in making those judgements.

Conclusion

There is a Māori saying 'Ahakoa he iti he pounamu' – 'Although it is small it is a treasure'. The school leadership in context courses were certainly a useful intervention by providing an

opportunity for school leaders to collect their thoughts about their school and others like it and by providing for unusually free-flowing discussion in a situation where most professional learning for school leaders was required to be on-message with government policy of the time. Nevertheless there was little option but to discontinue the courses. The problem of opening up contextual issues but being able to resolve few of them pointed to the limitations of a day-course approach to professional learning. Nor was it financially viable to 'roll out' the intervention to more groups of schools because there was no financial support from government and little indication that practitioners would self-fund the typical costs charged by a university for such professional learning without the lure of a more 'problem-solving' emphasis.

The school leadership in context intervention does highlight the multiple purposes of professional learning. Such initiatives can provide valuable understandings for participants. Even if the implications of those understandings are left unresolved, what we have here is a kind of critical professional learning for school leaders. Just as there is value in critical accounts of education that provide insights but little immediate application to practitioner or policy audiences, perhaps there are forms of professional learning that should be encouraged as being valuable for school leaders even when their utility is not immediately obvious. Local contexts seem to be one such area because appreciation of context is part and parcel of so many day-to-day school leadership issues and decisions.

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