

# Parents Appointing the Principal: The Experiences of Four New Zealand Primary School Boards of Trustees

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**Abstract:** *Universally motivated by altruism and the desire to serve their children's schools well, locally elected parent representatives of New Zealand boards of trustees (BOTs) are charged with the responsibility of appointing the principal. This paper draws on semi-structured interviews with the chairpersons of four primary schools in two cities – two in affluent high decile areas and two in relatively disadvantaged low decile ones – in order to examine the perspectives and understandings that informed the board recruitment and selection process. Findings suggest that the appointment of a principal with the capacity to exercise highly effective, contextually specific educational leadership is more likely to occur in higher decile schools and is most needed in lower decile ones. The paper concludes that targeted support and a review of governance arrangements will be necessary for inequity in principal appointment processes to be addressed.*

## Introduction

For most New Zealand schools, 2013 marks the election of their ninth board of trustees (BOT) following the devolution, in 1989, of school governance from central government to over 2,700 locally elected state primary, intermediate, secondary and composite school BOTs. *Tomorrow's Schools* (Minister of Education 1988) legislation enacted a raft of structural changes designed to abolish 'layers of administration in order to locate decision-making as close to the point of implementation' and to alter the 'balance of power between the providers and clients of education' (Education Review Office 1994: 5). The 1989 Education Act (New Zealand Government 1989) established BOTs as the Crown entities responsible for ensuring the provision for all students of a quality education in a safe learning environment, establishing strategic direction, and overseeing personnel, curriculum, property, financial and administration management.

The BOT became the legal employer of all staff in schools, including the principal. This represented minimal change for secondary schools whose board of governors had previously appointed the principal, but a major change for primary schools whose principals had been appointed by regional education boards acting on advice from the Department of Education's inspectors of schools.

The primary focus of this article is the experiences of primary school BOT chairpersons in appointing the principal. In establishing context for international readers, it is important to define the terminology used and to position this paper with respect to the research on New Zealand school governance.

## Terminology

### Primary Schools

In New Zealand, state (government owned and funded) primary schools provide New Zealand citizens and permanent residents with free elementary education for children in Years 1-8. In 2012, there were 1,878 full (Year 1-8) and contributing (Year 1-6) primary schools (Ministry of Education 2013b). Primary schooling commences when students turn five years old, although attendance is not compulsory until the age of six. Intake dates are not restricted and children are free to attend school from their fifth birthday onwards, an option which the majority exercise.

### Board Trustees

Members of the BOT are elected for a three-year period, either triennially or on an 18-month split-term basis. The 1989 Education Act (New Zealand Government 1989) stipulates that primary school BOTs shall comprise no more than seven and no fewer than three parent representatives, the principal, and a staff representative. Parent representatives are elected by parents of children enrolled at the school, the principal is an automatic member of the Board, and the staff representative is elected by employees on the school staff.

While Section 99(1) of the Education Act states that BOTs should reflect their unique ethnic and socio-economic diversity, gender, special and community character and 'so far as is reasonably practicable ... have available from within its membership expertise and experience in management' (p. 187), there are no prerequisite qualifications. Restrictions to eligibility are minimal. Section 103 of the Education Act excludes non-New Zealand citizens, undischarged bankrupts, those in breach of companies, securities and takeover Acts, and people who have 'been convicted of an offence punishable by imprisonment for a term of 2 years or more' (p. 195). Nominees to the position of trustee are required to attest their eligibility and while it is common for those standing (particularly in keenly contested school elections) to provide voters with personal statements that include education and career biographies, formal qualifications are not required. In addition to elected parent representatives, boards are able to co-opt people who offer specific expertise, with the proviso that co-opted trustees must not outnumber elected parent representatives.

### Deciles

Introduced in 1995, decile rankings are a statistical measure reflecting the socioeconomic backgrounds of students attending each school. They are derived from census information for households with school-aged children, which is aligned with the student addresses that schools provide. Student addresses are assigned to mesh blocks containing approximately 50 households, which are then examined against five socioeconomic indicators: household income (the percentage of households with income in the lowest 20 per cent nationally), occupation (the percentage of employed parents/caregivers in the lowest skilled occupational groups), educational qualifications (the percentage of parents/caregivers with no tertiary or school qualifications), household crowding (the number of people in the household divided by the number of bedrooms) and income support (the percentage of parents/caregivers who received a benefit in the previous year).

The resulting decile ranking positions the school in one of ten equally sized school groups. Decile one schools comprise the 10 per cent of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, while decile ten schools have the lowest proportion of these students. It is important to note that the school's decile averages the socioeconomic backgrounds

of students enrolled, rather than reflecting the overall mix. Population concentration and the existence of school zones in large urban areas mean that student socioeconomic composition in urban primary schools tends to be more homogeneous than it does in non-zoned and rural areas. It is also important to note that while 10 per cent of schools are assigned the same decile ranking, this does not automatically reflect 10 per cent of the student population. In the period 2000-11, students in decile 1-3 schools declined by 12 per cent nationally, while the numbers in decile 8 to 10 schools grew by 23 per cent, a demographic which invites Cathy Wylie's conclusion that 'many low-decile schools are smaller than they were and less able to attract their community's higher-performing students' (Collins 2013).

Deciles are primarily used as a funding mechanism to distribute equity funding pools and mitigate the barriers to learning that intensified following the enactment of *Tomorrow's Schools* legislation. There is widespread recognition that a school's academic performance and the socioeconomic status of its community are inextricably linked and that 'socio-economic disadvantage is the source of the largest and most difficult barriers to learning' (New Zealand Parliament Education and Science Committee 2003: 5). Calculated and funded on a per pupil, decile-related basis, the Ministry of Education currently describes the largest equity fund, Targeted Funding for Educational Achievement (TFEA), as an instrument that enables 'Boards of decile 1-9 schools to lower the barriers to learning faced by students from low socioeconomic communities' (Ministry of Education 2013a).

## Research on New Zealand School Governance

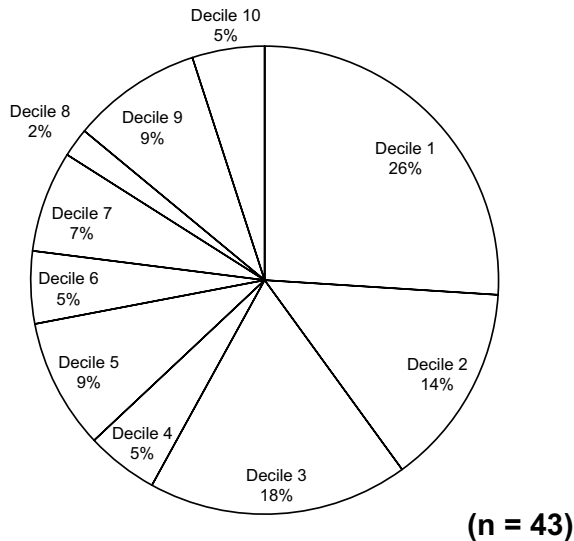
Given the essential nature of their role, research on BOT governance in New Zealand schools, in general, is surprisingly thin and research on the principal appointment process even more so. The most recent and comprehensive evaluation of self-managing schools can be found in Cathy Wylie's (2012) *Vital Connections*. In her book, Wylie traces the development of and challenges for BOT governance since the inception of *Tomorrow's Schools*. Reflecting on governance trends drawn from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) national surveys of primary schools in 2003, 2007 and 2010 and secondary surveys in 2003, 2006 and 2009, Wylie concludes that governance has become 'more focused but no simpler' (Wylie 2012: 171).

The capacity of individual boards and trustees to fulfil complex governance tasks is an issue of ongoing concern, but one officials and researchers know relatively little about (Robinson, Ward & Timperley 2003). In 2007, the Education Review Office (ERO) conducted a summary of governance findings in 673 school reviews (545 primary and 128 secondary) completed between January 2005 and March 2007. Acknowledging that 'the extent to which ERO reports on aspects of governance as part of each school's education review varies' (ERO 2007: 5), ERO nonetheless concluded that approximately 60 per cent of boards sampled were governing their schools well, 33 per cent needed to address identified areas for improvement, and 7 per cent required 'targeted interventions' to bring about significant 'improvements to the quality of governance practice' (ERO 2007: 1). In the schools requiring targeted interventions, ERO attributed poor governance to a lack of trustees' 'understanding of their roles and responsibilities' including 'poor personnel management practices; a lack of good quality, analysed student achievement information for Board decision making; a breakdown in Board, staff and community relationships; risks to staff and student safety; and non-compliance with specific legislative requirements' (ERO 2007: 2).

In schools requiring targeted interventions to improve governance practice, ERO commonly increases the frequency of the review cycle and conducts Arotake Paetawhiti<sup>1</sup> reviews over the course of one to two years, instead of the usual three-year cycle. If ERO considers further external intervention necessary, it can recommend to the minister of education, under Part 7A of the Education Act (New Zealand Government 1989), that the BOT be required to engage specialist help (Section 78K), that a limited statutory manager (LSM) be appointed to oversee specified governance matters (Section 78M) or, in extreme cases, that the BOT be dismissed and a commissioner appointed in their place (Section 78N).

Information released under the 1982 Official Information Act<sup>2</sup> reveals that 43 (a little over 2 per cent) of full and contributing primary schools currently have an LSM or commissioner in place. Figure 1 shows that the majority of these external statutory interventions occur in low decile schools.

**Figure 1:** External intervention in school governance: Limited statutory managers and commissioners in full and contributing New Zealand primary schools, by decile, July 2013



This suggests that BOTs in poorer socioeconomic areas are more likely to struggle with governance tasks than they are in more affluent ones, a conclusion borne out in the governance stocktake undertaken in 2008 by the New Zealand School Trustees' Association (NZSTA), which provides member boards with advisory and professional development services. The stocktake found that 'schools in rural and isolated areas, and those serving students in low socioeconomic areas, are more likely than other schools to have difficulty in a number of areas, including recruiting the right mix of people onto their Boards' (NZSTA 2008: 18).

Robinson & Ward shed some light on governance activity in two economically disadvantaged urban multicultural communities. Twelve participating board chairs, 11 principals, and 9 Ministry

1 The name of this ERO review draws on the Māori proverb, 'Kumēa te paetawhiti kia tata' ['Draw closer the distant horizon'], <http://www.ero.govt.nz/Review-Process/Criteria-for-Timing-Decisions>.

2 K. Casey, Ministry of Education, personal communication, 15 July 2013.

of Education officials were presented with four hypothetical governance scenarios, three focusing on educational 'rather than financial or property dimensions of a Board's role' (Robinson & Ward 2005: 172) and the fourth on appraising the principal. The educational scenarios related to the reporting of student achievement levels, implementation of homework policy, and reporting to parents. The authors found that Ministry of Education officials were more able than principals, who were in turn more able than board trustees, to 'discriminate different levels of governance quality. They were both more complimentary and more critical, suggesting they had a richer set of benchmarks ... about what counted as good and poor practice' (2005: 173-74). Practice benchmarks were primarily managerial in nature, however, and the authors found little evidence that espoused democratic and educational values shaped governance activity:

our results indicate that governance discourse is not primarily educational, even if the governance activities have profoundly educational implications....If good governance in policy development involves only adequate community consultation, appropriate role demarcation and effective task completion, there is no assurance that the resulting policy will be educationally sound. (2005: 182)

Elsewhere, Macpherson & McKillop (2002) have evaluated the process and outcomes of an in-depth training programme for BOTs of schools in the Northern Region with 'high' and 'medium' governance needs, and Piggot-Irvine (2008) has conducted success case studies of the governance strategies utilised by three primary Boards identified by training and development coaches as being effective.

## **Appointing the Principal**

Of the potential scenarios facing a board, the appointment of the principal is arguably the most critical task they will undertake. Charged with the knowledge that 'the success of a school in providing its educational services depends, to a considerable extent, on the success of the Board in attracting and appointing an effective principal' (ERO 2001: 1) parent representatives with wide-ranging abilities and life experiences must endeavour to recruit and select a principal who possesses the capability to create, maintain, review and renew a learning and achievement culture, satisfy demands for external accountability, and guide the ongoing, evolutionary development of the school. Interestingly, demands for external accountability do not extend to the appointment of the principal. While they are required to abide by Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO) legislation, boards have absolute power over the recruitment and selection process, and there are no mandatory reporting requirements.

More recently, NZCER has compiled a database on principal vacancies and appointments and surveyed the boards involved (Wylie 2010; Robertson 2011). This data includes the total number of principal vacancies, the type of advice sought by boards in the appointment process, and the perceived usefulness of this advice (see Table 1). Although varying response rates reflect the voluntary nature of the survey and provide a partial picture at best, it is evident that the vast majority of boards engaged some form of external advice prior to, and during the appointment process.

**Table 1:** Principal vacancies and appointments, 2008-2010

National surveys	2008 (Wylie 2010; Robertson 2011)	2009 (Robertson 2011)	2010 (Robertson 2011)
No. of principal vacancies in full and contributing primary schools	235	139	164
Survey response rate	66%	60%	41%
% of BOTs enlisting external advice	95%	97%	98%
Type of external advice used			
Private consultants (including former principals)	48%	45%	46%
Another (current) principal	34%	41%	42%
School's current principal	11%	16%	22%
School Support Service Advisers	13%	15%	11%
Limited Statutory Manager (LSM)	3%	5%	7%
BOT training and support provider	n/a	n/a	10%
Ministry of Education	n/a	n/a	6%
Recruitment agency	n/a	n/a	2%
Other sources	21%	11%	16%
Ministry of Education assistance in appointment process*:			
i. Advice on professional experts			
BOTs wanting advice	n/a	39%	21%
BOTs receiving advice	n/a	20%	13%
BOTs not wanting advice	n/a	23%	31%
ii. Advice on making appointment decision			
BOTs wanting advice	n/a	28%	26%
BOTs receiving advice	n/a	18%	13%
BOTs not wanting advice	n/a	35%	31%
iii. Support in making appointment			
BOTs wanting support	n/a	36%	27%
BOTs receiving support	n/a	18%	18%
BOTs not wanting support	n/a	28%	22%

\* 2008 data derived from NZCER secondary national survey; 2010 data from NZCER primary national survey. n/a – not available, due to the changing nature of survey questions.

The extent to which they follow this advice and adhere to relevant legislation varies considerably. Keren Brooking's focus group research into the appointment practices of 36 board chairs, 30 principals and 14 advisors to the board, provides important insights into the ways in which Boards execute their employer responsibility in appointing the principal (Brooking 2003, 2004, 2007, 2008). She found that boards do not always apply the 'merit principle' consistently and 'frequently resort to "gut instinct" or "local logics" in their decision making about principals' (Brooking 2004: 28). This led her to conclude that *Tomorrow's Schools* has had 'conservative consequences in relation to the gender and quality of principalship ever since' (Brooking 2008: 42). While Brooking states that 'size, location, decile rankings and ethnic populations of schools were considered important variables for selection' (Brooking 2003, p. 3), she does not differentiate findings according to decile.

This raises questions around the possible differences in understanding and approach taken by board chairs in high and low decile schools and provides the rationale for this paper.

## Research Approach

The data for this paper comes from re-examination of a small-scale research project which sought to establish the extent to which BOTs were familiar with the theory underpinning concepts of highly effective principals and utilised this in the appointment process (Morrison 2006). The initial research took the form of a qualitative study in which chairpersons of BOTs who had appointed a principal within the preceding 12 months participated in semi-structured interviews. While the study revealed considerable diversity in understanding and approach, the deliberate exclusion of specific context factors precluded analysis from a socioeconomic or decile perspective. Subsequently, a concern for social justice (Bush & Heystek 2010; Connolly & James 2011; Gordon & Nocon 2008; Hatcher 2012; Hazeldine 1998; Mncube & Mafora 2013; Ravitch 2010; Robertson & Dale 2002) has prompted the reconsideration of the experiences of the primary school board chairs.

Analysis from a socioeconomic perspective exposes a fundamental tension inherent in much educational research. On the one hand, it is important to describe the unique contexts that give rise to individual and collective meaning and decision-making, whilst on the other, the need to protect participant confidentiality leads researchers to hide important contextual factors. The endeavour to contextualise invariably compromises the endeavour to anonymise. In this research, the tension is eased, although not fully resolved, through assigning participating chairpersons unisex pseudonyms, limiting demographic and geographic identifiers, and withholding the reference information for Education Review Office reports on the participating schools. To enable the use of personal pronouns, participant gender has been randomly assigned.

## The Research Participants

The research participants are chairpersons of four primary school BOTs (see Table 2). The four schools are located in two large urban areas. Roll composition data shows that the two high decile schools have a predominantly Pākeha (NZ European) student population, whereas the two lower decile schools have a predominantly Māori roll. Evaluative comments from external Education Review Office reports reflect variance in the quality of governance exercised by BOTs in these schools.

**Table 2:** Research participants

	School A	School B	School C	School D
Chairperson	Ashley	Brett	Chris	Darryl
Location	Urban area 1	Urban area 2	Urban area 2	Urban area 1
Decile	2	4	9	10
Size	200-250	200-250	150-200	600-650
Ethnic composition	72% Maori 15% European 8% Pacific 5% Asian	50% Maori 38% European 2% Pacific 8% Asian 2% Other	72% European 27% Maori 1% Pacific	80% European 13% Asian 7% Maori
BOT Governance (ERO external review comments)	Trustees undergoing training to increase understanding of governance roles. Committed to making decisions in best interests of students and teachers. Responsive to whānau aspirations for children and mokopuna.	Recent changes in BOT membership. New chairperson. Trustees have good understanding of governance matters. Bring range of skills and experiences. Enthusiastic about governance role.	Experienced BOT provides effective governance. Chairperson supported in role by previous chairperson. Trustees bring range of skills and expertise that contribute to effective governance. BOT internal training and support systems ensure continuity of governance.	Experienced chairperson. Trustees possess range of skills and relevant expertise. Student centred approach to governance. Sound strategic thinking and planning.

## Research Findings

Research findings reveal that, while participants operate within a similar managerial paradigm, the depth of their understanding and application of appointment processes varies considerably. Trustees in higher decile schools are arguably better positioned to fulfil this critical employer responsibility.

### ***Enormity of the Task***

Universally motivated by altruism and the desire to serve their schools well, participants echoed the view expressed in official documents (ERO 2001; NZSTA 2009) that the appointment of a principal was the most important task that any BOT would be expected to undertake. While they were mindful of the burden of responsibility placed upon them, they also considered it a privilege. For Ashley, it meant an opportunity to shape the primary school environment that her five year old was entering: 'He's just starting at school, and here I was having a say in who was going to be the principal, who was going to be the role model for my son and I felt really good.' Chris reflected that whilst devolution to self-managing schools increased pressure on BOTs, it allowed those most closely affected by the outcome the opportunity to select the applicant that 'best fit[s] our school



and what we're wanting to change and develop'. On balance, she reflected that *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms were a positive step towards ensuring a cultural match between principal and community:

Isn't it nice though, that we can actually choose our own principals? Yeah, what a privilege, so I'll give them a big tick for that. It's a huge responsibility but, at the end of the day, if your Board's up to it, could [make] a real difference.'

### **Board Composition**

Being 'up to it' requires confidence and competence. Participants generally expressed confidence in their ability to appoint a principal, either individually or collectively as a board. Levels of confidence were generated by personal experience and by the composition of BOTs. Brett and Darryl had experience in business recruitment and selection, and Chris had appointed a principal previously. For Ashley, the appointment process was entirely new and she felt the weight of responsibility vested in the board chairperson:

In appointing the principal, you don't realise 'til you're doing it how much of a big ask it is ... and how the decision rests on you, more or less. You're doing it and you think, 'Oh gosh ... if I've okayed the wrong person, then it's all on me.'

In her opinion, confidence levels would vary according to experience: 'If the board chair is an academic person, a lawyer or something, maybe they've got the confidence to just know what they're doing and go ahead and do it.'

Chris's experience in recruiting, interviewing and appointing a number of staff in her own workplace provided a solid foundation in employment processes. However, she was quick to acknowledge a lack of expertise in determining professional leadership requirements:

I thought, well, I'm not new to interviewing. It's the education side of it and it's the academic side that's hardest for the board to get its head around, and to know what to ask. And I guess that's where the composition of your board's important.

Like Chris, Darryl was acutely aware of the strengths and shortfalls in the board's expertise: 'School boards are unique in the fact that they almost always have no-one who has any educational skill.' Reflecting on his own board, Darryl commented,

They're all very skilled people in their area and, as a team, it's a great board. It's unique. You wouldn't believe how well the skill base on the board matches up with the areas, the requirements of the school. But we don't know the first thing about being an educator.... We're scientists and engineers and nurses and accountants and IT people. So, it's a different language in some cases.

Differentiating between the appointment of chief executives in a business environment and principals in an education environment, Darryl recognised that BOTs often lacked the competence to discern highly effective leadership potential and discriminate between applicants:

In this case, I know what the job needs to do in terms of the outcome, but I don't know about the skill level or the capability, or that sort of thing. So I'm not employing someone in an area that I'm, myself, competent in. So I think that's the key difference.

Aware that this lack of competence exposed BOTs to candidates who presented well but lacked the necessary credentials, Darryl's board concluded that they were 'qualified enough, given the right guidance, to pick the right person'.

### **Seeking External Advice**

Three of the four board chairs recognised the importance of ‘the right guidance’ and sought external advice in the appointment process. The exception was Brett, for whom the financial outlay necessary to secure external advice, in relation to the perceived benefits, was prohibitive: ‘We couldn’t see the reasoning for spending the amount of money it was going to cost.’

While money was also an issue for Ashley, she acted on recommendations from the outgoing principal and used informal networks to approach an ex-principal of a school ‘very much like ours’.

I’d spoken to the principal that was leaving and she gave me a couple of names and I rang those people and they had wives that would apply for this position. And they gave me names, so it was like down the line. And then the guy that I chose, we’d done a bit of board training with, so it wasn’t like he was a stranger and we all got on well with him. So, we were quite lucky that he was at the end of our list and he was available....And then he’d come and talk about the community from that school, and it was so much like us that we had the feeling that he kind of knew what we were looking for.

Chris and Darryl were more discriminating in their choice of advisor, and both elected to work with present or past principals. After holding preliminary discussions with the board and staff, and canvassing the school community, Chris phoned NZSTA and sought guidance. The rationale for this was that the board ‘didn’t want to get this wrong’. Despite possessing considerable management, HR and recruitment skills, they recognised an important shortfall in expertise: ‘We didn’t feel, apart from our staff rep, that we were as well informed on the academic side or the educational experience.’ Chris received from NZSTA ‘two or three choices of local existing principals, their backgrounds, where they were working, what their experience was and the sorts of skills they could bring to our party’ and ‘went from there’.

In addition to educational reasons, Darryl articulated a strategic dimension to the selection of an external advisor. Because the board anticipated that many applicants for this highly sought-after principal position would come from within the region, they considered a local specialist advantageous in assisting them to identify potential risk:

We had no knowledge of people in the space, so we wouldn’t be able to look down the list and say, ‘Oh, he’s applied for every principalship in the country and he’s been kicked out of three’. And they wouldn’t feature on your CV. You can do due diligence and you can ring up and take references but, at the end of the day, if someone wants to get past your defences, they can.

The selection of an educational advisor requires a discriminating approach and remains problematic. Unaware of research literature, participants were in the catch-22 situation of not knowing enough to be able to select and give appropriate direction to an advisor (ERO 2001). It was clear that, in selecting an advisor, participants relied more on rapport, trust and gut instinct than a rigorous assessment of potential advisors’ specialist knowledge. Darryl felt that their advisor was

knowledgeable, spoke in terms that we could understand, didn’t try and flannel us, didn’t try and sell himself.... I’m sure this person had been a principal. I’m sure this person had been a school inspector and had managed a number of appointment processes, so was experienced in what we wanted, but was also an experienced educator.

He conceded that ‘we could have been snowed [but] we felt we could trust him ....we felt comfortable, so we did appoint that person’.

### **Person Specification: Continuity versus Change**

There is no doubt that parent representatives possess an intimate understanding of their particular school context and a vested interest in securing its future. 'Local logics' (Brooking 2004) not only shape perceived current reality but also future leadership priorities. For Ashley, this meant overlooking beginning principals:

Our school is not a standard school. I know all principals have to start off, but I would find it really hard to employ one that came and this was the first school they came to. We've got so many social factors that I think it would be really hard.

Ashley felt that their collective decision-making on the capabilities that the successful applicant would require came from the heart: 'We have an *aroha*<sup>3</sup> here and it's important to us'. The resulting Person Specification amalgamated the diverse opinions of an ICT expert and two lead teachers who provided the academic 'mental know-how', and the full BOT whom Alex described as 'mums' rather than 'intellectuals'. They soon reached consensus over content but took longer to determine weightings. Alex believed relationships and communication skills to be key, while others 'thought that professional leadership was more important. And we had someone else that thought the management was more important. Then we had another one that said it was curriculum knowledge'.

Conversely, Brett's reading of context led him to favour the appointment of a beginning principal, based on the assumption that experienced principal applicants would 'come in with a broom and clean sweep everything, change everything to what they wanted and we didn't want that. We voted for the aspect of us educating or training the principal to suit us.'

Darryl was also mindful of the change versus continuity dilemma, but approached this from a less entrenched perspective. Having experienced two years of 'huge change: staffing, structure, teaching methodology, analysis, performance measuring', the board were particularly mindful of the need to pause and review progress:

The board really did need to look at the school as a whole and say, 'What sort of principal do we want? We've just made a whole lot of changes. Do we want a principal who is going to come in and change it all again, or do we want a principal who will come in and pick up what they've got, run with it for a while, analyse how it's working, reflect on that, change anything that needs to be changed and then implement that?'

In considering the human impact of change on staff and students, Darryl's board recognised that 'there were people bedding into new processes' and that the evidence supporting improved learning outcomes would take time to accumulate. They consequently concluded that a period of consolidation was desirable and, rather than appoint another 'change agent', they looked for someone 'who was able to bring stability to what was the end of a period of turmoil. And turmoil's a strong word, but you know what I mean.'

### **Internal Prejudices?**

In an effort to establish internal research consistency and identify unofficial discourses, participants were asked to comment on the critical success factors that would enable them to distinguish between two hypothetically equal applicants. Ashley's and Chris's responses were coloured by actual experience. For Ashley, the deciding factor was 'the social side of things'. Her board arranged a conference call with each candidate, presented them with two scenarios based on real incidents

3 *Aroha* is used in this context to mean special love and caring.

that had happened at school (one involving parent conflict, the other ‘child-based’) and ‘went by those answers’.

The reputation of the school meant that Chris’s board was ‘inundated with really exceptional people applying for the position’. Confronted with the dilemma of having to choose between two exemplary candidates, and wanting to appoint the person who would best fit the culture of the school, the board arranged psychometric testing. To Chris’s amusement, but not total surprise, the results were inconclusive and ‘it came back to best fit for our school’. As she hoped to avoid ‘the risk of a younger person using our school as a very quick stepping stone’, potential tenure became an important determinant.

Brett’s board similarly hoped to avoid ‘a two-year flick around’ and to appoint someone who was likely to remain in the position for five years. In direct contravention of employment legislation, Brett admitted that the final decision would come down to age and gender. He perceived male principals to be more effective disciplinarians who would provide a ‘father figure or authority amongst the children’.

Darryl adopted the contrary view that lack of day-to-day interaction between students and the principal minimised ‘the strong male leadership thing’ and was emphatic that gender would not form part of the unofficial selection criteria. While acknowledging the populist discourse that emphasises society’s need for strong male role models, he believed it was ‘unfair on schools to be expected to provide that’ and was conscious of staff as well as student need:

I certainly don’t perceive that as being an important thing for staff. I think staff would much prefer to have someone who is a good leader, someone they could turn to, someone they could confide in, someone they could go to for support, go to for help, guidance, all those things. So it’s more important that they’re approachable, actually, than it is that they’re tall, dark and handsome ... and male.

In the event that two applicants were ‘as close as you say and you can’t separate them on any of the selection criteria which you’ve chosen’, Darryl considered it important to assess staff feelings because staff would have daily contact with the principal: ‘Boards of trustees are there for three years. They meet them [the principal] once a month .... In their term of reference, how much can go wrong? Don’t ask the board of trustees at [name of school] that, but you know what I mean!’

Should staff indicate that they would happily work with either applicant, Darryl believed that it would come down to gut feel: ‘At the end of the day, if we really can’t decide, it’s intrinsically how do we feel about it? It’s our PPK of what this person brings.’ Darryl’s personal practical knowledge inclined him towards the ‘person who has the most potential to rock’ rather than the one whom he most wanted to work with. In his experience, this was often the least experienced candidate because ‘they’re probably the person who is easiest to motivate and to get really pumping ... it often pans out as the youngest. They’re probably the person who is going to get in and do the best job for you.’

### **Recommendations**

While they were arguably no better informed on how to select the right person for the job, participants made a number of recommendations which they believed would benefit future boards. These included streamlined access to principal appointment advice and guidance documents, and the provision of physical support in the form of training, advisors and funding.

Ashley commented that she received a letter in the mail advising the board of the support available should they decide to appoint a first-time principal, but was unaware of advice and guidance

documents until a handbook arrived after the process was concluded. Unaware of the enormity of the task when she began, Ashley felt that the government should provide more support for board chairs and favoured the involvement of consultants.

Discovering that the section on principal appointment was missing from the *Trustee Handbook*, Chris searched the Ministry of Education and NZSTA websites. While she was successful in accessing online support, she found the exercise both time-consuming and less than straightforward. This led her to recommend summary guidance which would alert BOTs to the location of detailed information, eliminate the time required for them to solicit it themselves, and minimise the likelihood of them overlooking it altogether.

Darryl suggested that more could be achieved through 'training boards of trustees more on principal appointment'. Despite the appointment of a principal being 'probably the single most important thing a board of trustees gets to do', he had yet to see any comprehensive training offered. Whilst 'quite good guidelines' existed on the NZSTA and Ministry of Education websites, and the topic of principal appointment had been touched upon during NZSTA training courses for BOTs, 'it certainly wasn't in-depth analysis' and the superficial nature of this coverage led him to conclude that 'there's no training, really'. Rather than requiring schools to use a consultant, Darryl favoured training which would develop the analytical capacity of the Board and assist it in 'defining the state of the school'.

## Discussion

Motivated by a magnanimous desire to serve their children and those in their community, trustees are aware of the enormity of the task and the burden of responsibility that appointing a principal brings. Trustees are essentially 'good people behaving well ... taking care to appoint honourable and competent personnel, and then trusting them to get on with the job' (Hazeldine 1998: 205). However, this care is exercised within parameters determined by the varying expertise that trustees bring with them when elected or seconded to BOTs and the variform advice of those they consult to fill perceived shortfalls in knowledge and experience.

Consequently, not only are some schools better able to attract highly effective principals, but some BOTs are better positioned to identify and appoint them. While it is impossible to generalise across the field, this study shows that the board chairs of the two high decile schools had more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the requirements of the principal role, and realised more fully the limitations of their expertise. They possessed greater knowledge of existing support mechanisms, both physical and human, and were better positioned to seek out what they didn't know. Importantly, they were less likely to subvert the appointment process from a procedural and legal standpoint. This made the appointment of the applicant with the greatest potential to be a highly effective principal in these high decile school contexts more measured than serendipitous.

Whether policy-makers in the 1980s foresaw that BOTs in low decile schools would struggle to exercise their employer responsibility, in ways that did not further exacerbate the relative disadvantage caused by smaller and less qualified principal applicant pools, is a moot point. The challenge today lies in addressing inequity without disenfranchising committed, well-meaning and hardworking parent trustees.

Potential strategies include the demarcation of government funding for the employment of appropriately qualified advisors, the mandatory appointment of advisors to board recruitment and selection panels, greater involvement of Ministry of Education officials in the appointment process, and mandatory reporting requirements. Of the four strategies outlined, three reduce the autonomy

currently enjoyed by boards, a move likely to be resisted by many trustees and their representative body. The New Zealand School Trustees' Association is of the view that 'current arrangements for determining board composition do not need strengthening to ensure schools have sustainable and competent boards' (NZSTA 2008: 6) and that 'access to a broad range of quality proactive support (especially for principal appointment and performance management) at least to the level currently provided for personnel and industrial relations' (NZSTA 2008: 7) should suffice.

In Grieves & Hanafin's view, access to support is insufficient. Writing in the UK context, they describe human resource management (HRM) as the Achilles heel of school governance and argue that 'the variability of volunteers across different areas (with inner cities and deprived areas coming off worst) ... allows for the possibility of doubtful decision making' (Grieves & Hanafin 2005: 42). This leads them to advocate the presence of trained HRM professionals on all appointment panels. While such a move would undoubtedly ensure due process, it would not necessarily guarantee the inclusion of essential educational leadership discourses. On the contrary, this could further reinforce the prevailing managerial paradigm with which board trustees are most familiar.

New Zealand authors Springford (2006) and Wylie (2012) suggest that if policy-makers are serious about reducing disparities between the highest and lowest achieving students, it is time to re-examine governance. Springford expresses concern that 'publications to advise trustees require high literacy levels; and much of the training and support provided relies on boards' ability to self-review and recognise need' (Springfield 2006: 37). She posits an alternative governance structure in which a principal appointed by the Ministry of Education is charged with the responsibility for appointing each school principal within a cluster of schools.

Wylie similarly supports a form of 'recentralisation' but questions the ability of clusters to fundamentally recast school-government relations. Drawing on the McKinsey analysis of 20 improving schooling systems, she highlights the critical role of "'mediating layers'" between individual schools and the policy centre' (2012: 243) and advocates the construction of

a network of education authorities that support and challenge the schools that comprise them, in ways that nurture the capacity of schools to self-manage, while at the same time ensuring they contribute to the capacity of their fellow schools and to the authority as a whole (2012: 243).

## Conclusion

Despite the emancipatory rhetoric of parental involvement, this small-scale study suggests that New Zealand's devolved model of school governance unwittingly perpetuates a form of neoliberal educational Darwinism. Not only do low decile schools attract smaller and less experienced applicant fields, the appointing board appears less able to discern high calibre candidates from capable performers and more likely to subvert the appointment process from a procedural and legal standpoint.

If we are serious about reducing disparities in educational achievement, and creating a more equitable society, boards of trustees must be supported to recognise and appoint the best principal possible, in every school. To this end, loss of board autonomy may prove the smaller price to countenance and it is one that participants in this study were hypothetically open to paying.

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