

Aspects of Leadership: a Report

Judy Dixon

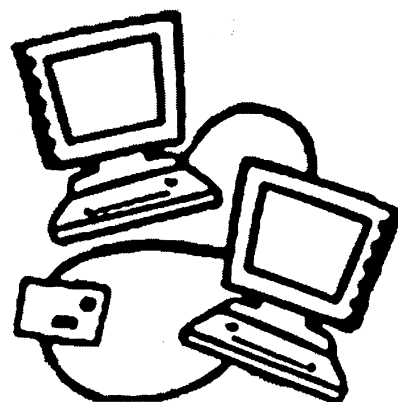
This report is based on my personal experiences as a member of a group studying educational leadership. The group of Waikato school principals and their university tutor networked through the electronic media, and then took part in a summer school at the University of Calgary, Canada.

What was the consensus that emerged among the New Zealand participants at the Summer School in Calgary? The agreement among the three principals and professor from Waikato was that we would not return, even if we could, to the days when educational administration was centralized by government. Each of us had the opinion that students had not been seriously disadvantaged because of the changes. However, Dr Webber (the

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Canadian tutor) did mention two serious cautions - first that caring administrators and teachers have striven to maintain good education systems at the expense of their time, money and even health: second that the underfunding of New Zealand education will lead to declines in the quality of education afforded New Zealand children.

These concerns mean educational leaders in a school must have a strong philosophy of teaching and learning and the courage to implement this despite outside impediments. Another Canadian educator's reflections during the summer school reflected on the wisdom of educational leaders who take the best of educational policy and make it meaningful for their students. I had talked in my seminar of educational leadership as a journey of discovery. The value of being a “reflective practitioner” as described by Schon (1987) was emphasised. Short's (1997, 86) has



suggested that reflection shows promise as a means for changing administrative behaviour through “analysis of theories in use”. The reflections I received from Canadian educators and teachers in my own school have all been positive - we will have all learned more by “reflecting on our own learning than by concentrating on getting others to change their ideas” (Mohr, 1998, p.42).

After my seminar one Canadian colleague wrote: “In reflecting on this powerful process (of a shared vision) I was impressed by the way it would honour voices, accentuate the positive, while focussing on the observable behaviours which undoubtedly would promote student learning”. In relation to this Darling-Hammond (1997) notes that principals and teachers must combine their energies and share their knowledge in a professional culture in order for continual progress to be made. This learning organisation has the potential to

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allow teachers' day-to-day work to become a form of high quality professional development.

One Canadian participant noted the New Zealanders' caution that underfunding in New Zealand had

the high levels of professionalism and altruism modelled by his colleagues in both countries. The degree to which teachers and administrators in Canadian and New Zealand schools (both public and

the way I communicate with friends and colleagues.

I have always questioned, and reflected on, practice, but often in isolation. I now had a window into "others'" thoughts and recent



Frankton Primary School welcomes the Canadian 'Summer' School exchange participants



readings at any time I cared to turn my computer on. For an educator who gets very involved in school life this has been a liberating experience. I did not have to spend extra time going to courses. I had many perspectives and literature recommendations on the computer screen whenever I wished to read them. The whole process has appealed to my imagination and creative nature, in that I learn by seeing the whole, and then by applying knowledge as I work through the parts in a practical way. Hart and Weindling (1996) suggest this approach for preparing school leaders as an alternative to fixating on content-knowledge. The relationship-building throughout the year has been very strong, and will

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be invaluable to me in extending my personal development in the future.

As a school leader I have felt a responsibility to do something with the learning I gained from the experience described here, and have been motivated to write two articles which I published on my return. At the school and classroom level the

the potential to lead to declines in education for all students. He referred to Darling-Hammond (1997) studies showing that "each dollar spent on recruiting high-quality teachers, and deepening their knowledge and skills, nets greater gains in student learning than any other use of an education dollar". This Canadian educator then added "in this context it was interesting to note that the NZ principal referred to above, was provided with remuneration for this course in Canada, plus some bonus dollars to extend her studies abroad. Her commitment to her students, staff, school and nation were clearly reinforced by this expenditure".

Professor Webber from Calgary commented on the misunderstandings of New Zealand education that are held by some Canadians and the mutually positive influences that Maori and European cultures have had in New Zealand.

He stated that he had increased clarity with which to perceive the education system in his own context as a result of explaining it to New Zealanders in Canada and New Zealand. He mentioned

private) have managed to maintain their focus on student learning, despite coping with a multitude of legislative reforms. Webber emphasised the danger of learning that occurs in cultural isolation and gave a timely warning that visiting another educational context for such a short time meant we were in danger of leaving with incomplete understandings of the people involved, their history and their world views.

This may be obviated by the chance that school leaders in both countries had for reflection and a chance for personal and professional growth.

Personal Impact

On a personal level this study was instrumental in making me step outside my comfort zone. I have always been a "risk taker" and the opportunity to develop new information skills that open a window to the outside world, and then meet some of the world participants, was an exciting journey. My confidence with technology has developed and e-mail has become a natural part of

experience has reinforced for me the need to be very clear that we speak the same language.

The whole experience has enriched my "patchwork quilt" of learning. I have added different textures and colours, academically, socially, culturally and spiritually to reflect on and to weave into my practical leadership style. I have always considered myself to be a "Boundary Breaker", throughout my career, and to have the opportunity to be part of an innovative Boundary Breaking Model for Leadership Development (Webber & Robertson, 1998) appealed to me. The up-to-date contributions to the Change Agency were critiquing recent publications and the issues were relevant and of concern at that particular point in time. Other staff in our school who were interested, also benefited from my access to e-mail in that pertinent information was shared and discussed.

Before I began this study I had read Delors (1995) and was impressed with the pragmatic, holistic approach this has for the role education has to play in personal and social development. Learning throughout life is stated as being the key to meeting the challenges of the Twenty First

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Century. Basic universal education is a priority.

As a result of this holistic experience I return to my school with greater energy and knowledge to affirm our learning community's challenge to build on the four pillars that are the foundations of education. These are: learning to be, learning to know, learning to do, and learning to live together so that all societies create a safe world in which no one's talents are hidden - learning is "the treasure within" (Delors, 1995).

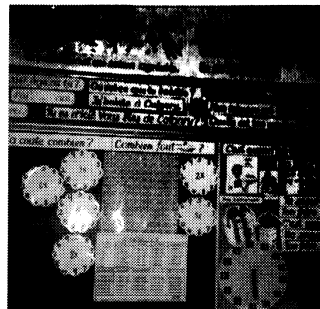
Conclusion

Senge (1992) describes a learning organisation as being in a continual development as people create and recreate their realities. At

the heart of learning organisations is a shift of mind where people see themselves as separate from the world to connected to the world. My personal analogy of leadership based on the spider's web can now be extended. Since being part of a Boundary Breaking model for Leadership Development (Webber & Robertson, 1998), I can now relate to the concept of a web. Each educational leader is a small but significant part of the wholeness. The experience of being part of the Change Agency and the summer school attendance has reinforced for me that the radial and spiral threads of the web are international and are strong and supportive. Each one of us is able to respond to or initiate change from any part of the web. This begins on an individual level from practising our own and others' theories, perhaps as the spider constructs her web, beginning from within. As each educational leader began to interact throughout the course to construct personal meaning, the whole web shifted, altered and adjusted to accommodate the changes. My boundaries as an educational leader have been stretched and I can now spread the web further to see my connection to the whole world rather

A glimpse of Canada...

*Far right: A different kind of basketball hoop!
Right: The Marion Carson School French Room
Below: The unusual almost windowless school buildings of Marion Carson School enclose an open-plan interior*



than threads shaped by one's own learning organisation.

My original concern for equity and the widening gap between rich and poor schools in New Zealand has been legitimised through parallel cases discussed in countries such as England, Australia, America and Canada. Brandt's (1997) concerns about educating children to see connections between using technology for good and to harm and Strike's (1997) discussions on centralized goal formation and consequences have been key components in the overall discussion of accountability. How we accommodate a sense of personal responsibility, accountability within the individual organisation that is democratic in character and non-discriminatory, and yet achieve a degree of national pluralism is still a puzzle to be solved. I believe at this present time that New Zealand has the opportunity to lead the way because we have implemented a "less centralized system that includes a national curriculum but not a national testing system" (Williams, Harold, Robertson & Southworth, 1997, 631).

If the government will afford educators and their learning communities the time, I believe we could address the challenge of responding to community and national accountability issues that are still unresolved. When schools are under constant pressure to adapt and adjust to the changing needs of our students and the demands of government whims, educational leadership becomes a major concern.

An interactive approach to school leader preparation "confronts the conflicting pressures we as school leaders face to preserve and pass on the learning and values of the host culture while responding to very real needs and pressures for change and development" (Weaver Hart & Weindling, 1996). My concern, as always, is the danger inherent in any form of socialization (whether it be professional or organisational) that reinforces the status quo. Hart and Weindling (1996, 315), suggest "organizational

socialization begins upon appointment and is specific to the education context." One of the biggest concerns is that when leaders are faced with the realities of their situation in relation to their own beliefs and values, they often abandon their principles and become inculturated by the existing habits and beliefs.

Throughout this personal study I have suggested a balanced viewpoint. We need to stop thinking that everything needs to be reinvented or changed, and have the courage to keep the positive models of the past and work creatively with them to seek a way forward for designing and building our common future. Learning does not happen in isolation and whether it be as a child, a teenager, or an adult, or an educational leader it is a process for life. Schools are only one "learning centre" among many and often make the least impression on the learner. I believe that the concept of life-long learning (Delors, 1995), if adopted as an international major role for education, will address my concerns for equity for all.



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