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### **The implementation of the revised New Zealand Curriculum: Unpacking the complexities of sustainability, school climate and distributed forms of educational leadership**

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#### **Abstract**

*The day-to-day practice of educational leadership practice can be extremely complex, demanding and yet rewarding; it is a highly relational activity. At the very heart of changing the climate of a school in relation to professional and student learning is the importance of building relationships of trust and sustaining productive levels of transparency particularly amongst the staff. This paper provides a 'window' into the day-to-day activities of staff from two New Zealand secondary schools as they are expected to implement the revised National Curriculum. The Ministry of Education state that the new National Curriculum has been framed in such a way so that schools should not be limited in the way that they offer learning experiences to students; it is a framework rather than a detailed prescribed plan. Therefore schools should have a greater opportunity to make locally based decisions in relation to professional and student learning.*

*An ongoing ethnographic project over twenty months in two urban secondary schools provides the context for the data that informs this paper. Observation is used as the primary means to interpret and understand day-to-day leadership practice in situ. The methodological approach is in contrast to the majority of leadership studies in education, where quantitative analysis and qualitative studies that focus mainly on espoused accounts of practice are commonplace. The data reveal that the day-to-day practice of educational leaders is not as straightforward and prescriptive as often is purported. School climates that emphasise sustainability and distributed forms of leadership can be arenas of both contestability and learning, but only if we are prepared to 'drill deep' below the surface of day to day leadership practice that can appear straightforward to research, label and prescribe. The barriers and opportunities for developing school climates of sustainable learning may then be revealed in relation to power relations and organisational learning. How teachers and school leaders in the two schools appear to navigate their way through initiatives and their relationship to school climate is a central focus of this paper.*

#### **Introduction: Setting the scene**

A new national or state curriculum is a significant signpost that can leave a lasting influence, on national and state identity and history. Throughout the 1990s New Zealand schools went through an extensive transition from a syllabus based approach to a framework approach that emphasised broader achievement objectives. The New Zealand Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 1993) was unique in that it placed Essential Skills alongside Essential Learning Areas, the latter incorporated the subjects commonly taught in schools. Each Essential Learning Area was separately implemented according to a timeline that spread from 1993 through to the late 1990s. It was a period when schools were also grappling with the accountability requirements that quickly followed on the heels of the proclamations surrounding self-managing schools, an outcome of the reforms informed by Tomorrow's Schools (Minister of

Education, 1988). Secondary schools were required to gain accreditation to deliver national qualifications, all schools were required to implement a performance management system, undergo external compliance checks by the Education Review Office, while the merits of the existing external national assessment mechanisms of School Certificate and University Bursary were regularly debated, culminating in a significant shift from normative to standards based achievement mechanisms from 2001. Teachers in New Zealand emerged from the 1990s having been part of the most extensive and sustained reform of education that the nation had ever experienced. The pillars of New Public Management (NPM): effectiveness, efficiency and economy (Sachs, 2003), had left their mark on us all.

Fast forward to nearly ten years later, and a revised new National Curriculum is being implemented across New Zealand schools with an intentional emphasis on effective pedagogy and Key Competencies replacing the Essential Skills of the previous curriculum framework. The principal function of the new National Curriculum “is to set the direction for student learning and to provide guidance for schools as they design and review their curriculum” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.6), though secondary schools also need to ensure that their school-based curriculum is directly informed by the achievement standards that shape the current national qualification framework relevant to schools, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). The pace of reform experienced in the 1990s has not relented, though there has been a steady shift in emphasis with the focus of national education support and official documentation (Ministry of Education, 2005, 2007). The organisational and sometimes managerial focus on the self-managing school of the 1990s has been superseded with a more direct focus on students, learning and student achievement. This shift is echoed by Robinson (2006) who argues that education leadership and learning should not be decoupled; I agree with this sentiment, though it is not new. Throughout the 1990s this foundational aspect of schools was what principals and teachers were battling to preserve in the midst of wide-spread reform that they generally perceived as taking their focus away from their main priority of teaching and learning.

Ironically, in these times of supposed greater emphasis on students, teaching and learning, principals and teachers in New Zealand still struggle to find sufficient space to focus as much as they would like to on these key areas (Hodgen & Wylie, 2005; Ingvarson et al., 2005; Kane & Mallon, 2006). Schools are now faced with a slightly different type of dilemma than they faced in the 1990s; the intensification of educational work can now also be due to external initiative overload that focuses on student learning. Though each Ministry supported programme in itself may be productive for enhancing learning, the sheer number of them may in fact be placing principals and teachers at risk. With a steady drop in government funding against inflation over many years, schools are perhaps I suggest, also buying into some of these initiatives due to the extra resource support that is tied to the fixed term contracts. They are caught in a position of needing to do more with less, which is resulting in a greater expectation of parental financial support of Government funded education through school donations and, within schools, a greater distribution and intensification of leadership work.

It is in this wider context where I am currently undertaking ethnographic research of distributed forms of school leadership practice in two urban secondary schools of similar size over a 20 month period. Both schools are expected to have the new revised National Curriculum implemented for the start of 2010 and staying true to the notion of self-managing schools, while also implementing their own initiatives to meet the needs of their own students during this time. The focus of this paper describes some of the practices emerging in each school as they seek

to meet the needs of their students, on the back of 20 years of reform and initiatives that are currently culminating in the required implementation of the National Curriculum.

### **Sustainability, climate and distributed forms of leadership**

The picture I have presented in the previous section highlights the increased likelihood that education in schools has become both complex and intense; it is perhaps of little surprise that in response to this, terms such as sustainable leadership and distributed leadership have become popular and in places offered as solutions to already overloaded school leaders. Gronn (2003) argues that this increase in complexity is “part of the price paid for self-managed institutional autonomy within a culture of performativity” (p.286). Consequently, the role of the principal has now become so large due to new reforms and initiatives that it is too big for one person to carry out (Grubb & Flessa, 2006). If there is to be a change of climate, so that sustainable futures for the next generation are realised in and through education, then there needs to be some change of the status quo at both a national and state policy level and at a local school level; the amount of innovation needs to be tempered with the consolidation of teacher professional learning (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). While being cognisant of the wider political forces that can shape practice and policy in our schools, they are however not the focus of this paper; rather, the research informing this paper is focused on how do schools in this wider environment create safe and encouraging environments through this milieu of activity to focus on learning and the implementation of a National Curriculum.

At a local level, leading learning in schools is a responsibility shared across all teachers, even though this practice may not always be equated to leadership, which in its official form is a usually attached to just those in a formal school management position. However, an acknowledgement that leading learning is inherently a distributed property does raise issues that are political in nature, particularly in relation to authority (Maxcy & Nguyen, 2006). Schools can be “arenas of struggle” (Ball, 1987, p.19). Merely distributing leadership as a means of hoping to establish sustainable climates of learning is on one hand easy to espouse, but on the other hand can be equated to “distributed pain” by teachers (Grubb & Flessa, 2006, p.535). My review of 32 studies of distributed leadership practice in schools (Youngs, 2007) highlighted that intentionality, trust and dialogue must be at the core of a school’s climate, where climate is “the study of perceptions that individuals have of various aspects of the environment in the organisation” (Owens, 2004, p.188). The theory suggests that relational trust can be a variable that contributes to improved academic and social outcomes for students (Robinson, 2007) and that dialogue is linked to the sharing of leadership and team and organisational learning (Argyris, 1999; Fletcher & Kaufer, 2003; Senge, 1990). If schools are to develop and sustain climates that emphasise both student and staff learning, then the relational aspect of school leadership and teaching should be evident in day-to-day practice as schools clear a way through their complex and intense settings.

### **The research study**

The overall objective of my research is to capture some of this day-to-day practice and contribute to the emerging theorising and understanding of distributed forms of school leadership. Parallel micro-ethnographic studies are situated in two secondary schools where data in the first of three phases was collected through general observation and focus groups; theoretical sampling informs the transition from one phase to the next. This paper focuses on

the emerging findings from this first phase. The studies are contextualised through two contexts in each school:

- an activity related to a school initiated endeavour (selected by the school); and,
- activity related to the implementation of the revised New Zealand Curriculum.

The schools currently are known by their pseudonyms, Esteran College and Penthom High School. Esteran College's school initiated endeavour is related to the implementation of restorative practice, whereas Penthom High School's is related to one-on-one mentoring of students.

### *Local school context*

Both secondary schools are State-funded and are situated in suburbs that are deemed by the Ministry of Education to have similar general socio-economic characteristics. Over the last three years Esteran College with approximately 1050 students, is generally regarded as a well established school with a stable student roll, has experienced change in terms of its Senior Management Team (SMT), with a new principal and two new deputy principals starting during that time; a fourth member of the SMT has been there for several years longer. Penthom High School with approximately 1300 students, is a relatively new school with a growing student roll and has four deputy principals alongside the principal. Both schools have similar organisational structures consisting of curriculum based teams and team leaders, complemented by pastoral care systems that are supported by Deans across each year level.

### *The sample*

The data utilised in this paper is drawn from 23 hours of non-participant observation; 12 hours in Esteran College and 11 hours in Penthom High School. Observation took place in the settings of meetings and planning days where my hand written field notes were subsequently written up in full soon after each observation. Most of the observations were of meetings involving usually nine to fifteen staff. Curriculum based meetings involved the Principal, the Deputy Principals and team leaders responsible for curriculum areas. Meetings related to the school based initiative involved either all of the staff or the staff directly responsible for implementing the initiative, on two occasions I was able to observe feedback groups consisting of people not directly involved in the school-based initiative. In each school a focus group consisting of the Principal and the Deputy Principals also took place as a means to understand each group's expectations of practice and direction in relation to school structure, climate, any distributed forms of leadership, implementing the school based endeavour and the National Curriculum.

In the sections that follow I provide a brief overview of some perceptions that each school's senior leadership team have of their school from the focus groups, followed by some descriptions and discussion of practice in relation to the revised National Curriculum and their own initiative drawing mainly on the observational data. Finally, I provide an initial synthesis of some of the emerging themes arising from the data.

## **Esteran College**

### *Perceptions of the current climate*

The Senior Management Team (SMT) of Esteran College perceive that the climate of their school is shifting; in general they see that staff are now less reactive, engaging more in professional conversations and have a clearer awareness of the overall the direction and goals of the school.

I think that most people now have more of an understanding about the direction that the school is wanting to take. They have a bit better idea I guess of big picture than what they've had before and probably see their role in that clearer than perhaps in the past. [DP B]

They all acknowledge that as a well established school, Esteran College has had a reputation of having a "happy" staff, though it hasn't been without its problems over the years as well. However, as new members have been appointed to the SMT, there has emerged an intentional shift to develop clearer structures and a climate where professional conversations should have a higher profile.

I'd say, our relationships are mostly professional. This is for the whole staff, sometimes there not, but you'd expect that. There's a sense of positivity and from my perspective anyway, amongst the staff, they're a happy staff I think by and large. Some of that perception of mine is based on speaking with people who come into the school and say this, you know, a nice place to be, and this is from relievers, and they are perhaps in a position to compare with situations in other schools. [DP A]

I think you hear a lot more professional conversations happening in the staff room than you previously did. [DP B]

Central to this shift towards establishing an intentional professional climate alongside the strong social networks is the recent development of a new strategic plan, the professional support provided by two members of the SMT to Heads of (Curriculum) Departments (HoDs), and the intentional focus on implementing the revised National Curriculum.

#### *The revised National Curriculum*

Throughout 2008 and 2009 schools are expected to be implementing the revised National Curriculum; some schools who are seemingly well down the road of implementation are profiled by the Ministry of Education at a national level through digital stories. However throughout 2008, Esteran College's SMT have focused initially on developing a climate of professional and school-wide conversations with the HoDs first. It has only been in the last month where the revised curriculum document has become the focus of the staff. Contributing to this desired change of climate were strong patterns of HoD focus; some tended to speak protectively of their own curriculum area and team so that the school-wide perspective would be lost. This was evident in the early Curriculum Management Team meetings where participants tended to talk only in relation to their own area, at times creating visible tensions in the meeting. Behind the scenes, however, the principal and one of the deputy principals started meeting with individual HoDs as a means of professional support:

I think that's taken that advocacy, "I need to be heard somewhere", out of Curriculum Management Team and put it into another space which is more about support and development so that the CMT is more about school wide issues. [Principal]

I think it is quite interesting watching the curriculum leaders meetings develop where there seems to be less of a sense of what's happening in my little world and more of a sense in what is happening in the school. [Principal]

I observed this transition take place across several meetings where HoDs shifted to a position where they started to show professional concern for other curriculum areas in the school. This broadening of their perspective has possibly contributed to a wider distribution of professional leadership throughout the school in preparation for implementing the revised curriculum with their curriculum teams while remaining cognisant of the overall direction and needs of the school.

Parallel to the support and development of the HoDs have been the intentional links that are being slowly established in the school climate:

But they've all had a copy of it [the National Curriculum] and probably all looked at it and we talk about it at staff meetings, this is how we'll use that language for the next five years, this is how we'll use our language for the next five years; innovative, individualised, and connected. We're starting to use that language constantly. [Principal]

While the staff had their attention turned to the revised curriculum they have also been introduced to a school based initiative this year, that of restorative justice practices as a means of dealing with incidents where someone has been affected through unacceptable student behaviour; rather than employ a punitive approach, restorative practices bring the offender and the offended face to face.

#### *The school based initiative*

In contrast to the development speed of Penthom High School's initiative discussed later in this paper, Esteran College has taken an intentionally slower approach:

Very slow, but definitely that filtering through is starting to happen and certainly getting the message across that restorative practice is not my, doesn't belong to me, it belongs to everybody. [DP B]

A small group of staff have received training during the year with restorative practice and their enthusiasm and commitment has led to other staff seeking out the training as well. The initiative, like the one at Penthom High School is being trialled across one year level throughout 2008 with the view to establish it more in the general school climate throughout 2009.

#### *Sustainability, climate and distributed leadership*

Intentional conversations are occurring particularly at the SMT level and indicate that the school-based initiative will merge with the school's implementation of the revised curriculum:

I think if you see restorative practice as residing in relationships and building constructive relationships in the classroom, but also between people generally within the school, you can also see learning in that way as well and you can also see leadership in that way. So I can see that the three should be merging together in some form. [DP A]

The three aspects of relationships, learning and leadership are possibly going to underpin Esteran's own school curriculum. The SMT have identified a focus on pedagogy as being the means to implement the national curriculum; they see this as being the 'bridge' between connecting the Key Competencies with the Learning Areas with a new cross-functional group possibly forming to focus on this bridge. How this approach evolves alongside the HoDs who are traditional key implementers of curriculum along with their teams may present some challenges in the months ahead as the professional climate of the school develops further.

## **Penthom High School**

### *Perceptions of the current climate*

Three core themes emanate from the Senior Leadership Team's (SLT) perception of the school; the emergence of cohesion, the minimisation of structure and the encouragement of taking responsible risks. There was an acknowledgement that a greater cohesion amongst the staff has emerged from the factional beginnings of the school, a view that has also been articulated by a group of staff with none of the SLT present. This cohesiveness was equated to the collective proactiveness of staff by the SLT:

Over time I think there's more cohesion than there was at the beginning of the school. I think we had factions at the beginning of the school. [DP A]

People are more keen to get together and work on something, not like perhaps sometimes in other schools that I've been in where you might have somebody go and 'poo-poo' a new idea, put their head in the ground or stir a bit of tension. That doesn't tend to happen because most people are keen to move forward and make things happen. [DP B]

Coupled to this view was the perception that the climate of the school, due to it being relatively new, was emerging out of a development phase into a phase of sustainability.

We're most probably just at the end of our childhood in terms of development and building and now we're into moving into a more, I suppose, a [pause] sustainability of structure. [Principal]

However, the move into a climate that emphasised a sustainable future for the school has raised an issue that will influence how the school will operate in the years ahead. There has always been an intention for the school to have minimal structure so that flexibility and innovation could flourish; as the school has grown larger this intention has been challenged:

There's a lot more structure now than what there used to be and I am not sure if that is a good thing. It certainly hasn't been imposed; it's more been, um... Evolved, yeah. And I suppose that I was hoping that you could [sic], the school wouldn't need the amount of structure that normal schools [pause] that most schools, have. I was hoping that it would be less structured. [Principal]

Contributing to this apparent tension is the school's espoused commitment to developing and emphasising thinking skills. Not only is this expectation directed to students, who are called "learners" by staff, it is also directed to staff:

One of the key facets of, learning is about risk-taking, and if you think of Art Costa's work around habits of mind, you know one of them is taking responsible risks, and what does that mean, and what does that mean to learners? And I don't think we've gone as far as we need to know on that continuum for our teachers to take responsible risks in their teaching, and you can't do that from a carpeted office, in other words I can't do that, I can only make the environment which allows people to take risks. [Principal]

Taking risks suggests that space needs to be provided for experimentation and trial. Against the backdrop of how the last 20 years of policy described earlier in this paper, creating space and minimal structures that go against conforming to the norm does perhaps create a unique challenge to this school, particularly in relation to what it intends to do with the revised National Curriculum.

### *The revised National Curriculum*

In 2006, schools, along with other stakeholders, were invited to respond to the draft of the revised National Curriculum; the Ministry of Education funded release time for schools to carry this through. The draft was replaced with the official version in 2007. The SLT in the focus group, and staff in meetings that I observed suggested that the day spent reviewing the document back in 2006 was the last time the school has looked at the Revised Curriculum in depth. At that meeting they all agreed that they were already carrying out the intent of the revised curriculum. This view was also reflected in some individual views of the purpose of a curriculum:

At the end of the day to though, I see curriculum as it is, written for those schools that really need to bring themselves up to the mark because I would hope that there's more than a smattering of schools who want to be doing a 'helluvalot' more than what's in it. [DP A]

I've been in curriculum writing parties, I know how they're written. You all sit around and bargain about what should be left out. [Principal]

This position has flowed through into the meetings where the Heads of Learning, who are in charge of curriculum-based teams, meet with the SLT. Across five meetings over three months, the revised curriculum has been mentioned only once. However, this is not to suggest that the school will not refer to the revised curriculum at all:

We don't have to do much work on the new curriculum. Okay, key competencies, we've got to do a little bit of, you know some people are saying that we have to do all this on the key competencies, you see, well I look at it and I think well, when someone tells me how to do a couple of them, cause I don't understand them that well. But, in terms of the big key competencies, I think there are big ones in there and little ones, I think within a few years we will probably have worked that out, quite, a little bit, a bit more. You know, the thinking key competencies, it's already strongly embedded in the school. I mean not as much as I want, but it's still strongly there. [Principal]

Another factor that has been keeping some of the teaching staff from engaging with Learning Areas of the revised National Curriculum is that the content aspects of the curriculum in New

Zealand secondary is influenced by how it is packaged into the National Qualification system, NCEA. At least one HoL has stated that their department is waiting for the review of the NCEA related achievement standards to be carried out first before they can look at the revised curriculum in more detail. Even though the revised curriculum explicitly states that schools should have their own curriculum, there is nevertheless a strong external driver in New Zealand, the achievement and unit standards that make up the qualifications that students can leave school with.

Despite much exposure through the Ministry of Education website, set up in relation to the revised National Curriculum, of schools throughout New Zealand undertaking some extensive reviews of what they currently do and plan to do, the focus and energy of Penthom High School is currently be poured into their own mentoring initiative of learners. Ironically, they may be implementing aspects of the revised curriculum without elevating the Ministry curriculum document.

#### *The school based initiative*

In July of 2008, after observing a mentoring scheme in another school, the principal of the school proposed that Penthom High School should trial a similar scheme across one year level. The Year 11 cohort was selected as they were in their first year of the national qualification, NCEA. Staff were invited by the principal to come on board as mentors with some of them being 'shoulder-tapped' in the process; in the end enough staff were designated as mentors to groups of approximately 12 students. The main aim of the mentoring scheme was to encourage student achievement in relation to NCEA. Within four weeks the scheme was underway, an example of the cohesiveness and shared purpose that was highlighted in the SLT focus group. Every couple of weeks the mentors, who included the principal and all the deputy principals, met. The dynamics within this group quickly revealed a fairly even distribution of involvement of mentors in the meetings; sociograms were developed based on the order of interactions within meetings. These dynamics were in contrast to the HoL meetings where involvement appeared to be more based around participants "zone of sensitivity" (Owens, 2004, p.314) of agenda items, where there was some degree of personal stake in the focus of the discussion.

Despite a lack of structure initially around the initiative, some structure started to emerge collaboratively after three months of operation with leadership emerging from with the mentor's group; as mentors interacted with the students and with other teachers, links with other school operations needed to be made. The initiative has been met with much enthusiasm from the students, who want it to continue next year. For many their enthusiasm appears to be attributed to notion that someone who is not their teacher cares for them and shows an interest in their achievement. It is however a little too early to see how much possible direct impact the initiative has had on student achievement and school climate; the school will need to wait until national results are due out next year. The school however is now facing the dilemma of how the initiative can be sustained across the three year levels involved in national qualifications and what structures need to be put in place to perhaps support sustainability.

#### *Sustainability, climate and distributed leadership*

An unexpected outcome of the school-based mentoring initiative was that it has had both a positive and negative impact on the school climate. Staff, including those not directly involved in the initiative, acknowledge that the impact in terms of student transformation of motivation and completion of work has been "amazing", a view shared by most of the Year 11 students especially those 'borderline' ones who benefited most from it. However, the students at Year 12,

were generally upset that they had been excluded; they thought the school had let them down. Consequently, Year 12 students who were identified as being at risk of not achieving enough achievement and unit standard credits to gain NCEA Level 2 were also mentored for their last two to three weeks of school; the response again from the students was one of enthusiasm.

The distribution of leadership amongst the mentors, where they have been encouraged to be risk-takers and innovative does come with its problems though. Staff are now just starting to ask the question as to whether this initiative is sustainable if it is to be expanded in 2009. Some are suggesting that clear structures need to be put into place, so this issue will be also possibly be magnified by the SLT's espousal of minimal structure. How the school journeys through this next phase should start to emerge over the next few months and possibly reveal how it deals with any defensive patterns that can undermine organisational learning and sustainability.

### **An initial emerging theme and concluding comments**

Structure has emerged as a key theme to date through both schools. However, each school's principal has a different expectation of what impact structure can have:

You look at your structures and you say, okay, what do we need to do to create, um, to create the context in which this will flourish. [Principal, Esteran]

So some of the structures that are in schools, we've ignored, because I believe that some of them are very, are...panoptical. [Principal, Penthom]

This possibly has led to contrasting journeys to date for both of these schools in relation to implementing the revised curriculum. Esteran College is intentionally developing structures and professional relationships to underpin the implementation while taking a slow approach to its own initiative. Penthom High School, on the other hand, is placing most, if not all of its focus on its own initiative, and very little on the revised curriculum. Both schools have the same overall goal, enhancing student achievement and learning, but are employing differing means in their intention to achieve this.

Innovation, however, is rarely neutral, ideological interests may come under threat (Ball, 1987). Both schools are poised to move either the implementation of the revised curriculum or their own initiative to a more school-wide level. Sitting beneath the surface will be the issue of work intensification and sustainability. Recently they have both intentionally encouraged dialogue with staff in relation to the changes taking place; how they handle the feedback will determine the further shaping of their own climates. If issues that are potentially threatening to their plans are kept undiscussable then organisational learning (Argyris, 1999), risk-taking, emergent and distributed leadership, and trust will be undermined. If the staff in both schools can model the vision for "young people" of New Zealand outlined in the revised curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.8) and show themselves to be confident, connected, actively involved and lifelong learners, then perhaps both schools, despite their contrasting climates and philosophies, will attain to their goal of enhancing the quality of learning, teaching and student achievement. They then will become an argument against using 'one-size-fits-all' measures that try and ensure schools keep to a norm.

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