In New Zealand in the last four years, since the implementation of the Government's policy statement on educational administration Tomorrow's Schools (Lange, 1988) school effectiveness, accountability and excellence in learning have become the focus of interest of the wider community. The reform of school administration that has since taken place has required that individual school principals take on changed and expanded roles in managing their schools.

Although the Tomorrow's School's policy document emphasised that the principal would be "the professional leader of the institution" (p10) and that "principals will be expected to work in a collaborative relationship with their staff"(p11) much of the booklet's definitions of what the principal would actually do defined a managerial rather than a professional leadership role. Principals would be responsible for matters such as budgeting, property maintenance and employment of staff as well as educational leadership. There was to be a much clearer focus on the role of the principal. The principal was the school's professional leader and there were three functions that she or he was expected to carry out. The first of these was to contribute to and implement the policy of the school Board of Trustees so as to achieve the objectives set out in the charter - the executive function. Secondly, the principal was expected to lead the staff of the school in the implementation of school programmes - the instructional leadership function - and the third function was that of reporting on the achievements of the school.

In 1990 I worked with a group of 11 school leaders in an action research project to investigate the principals' new role. I wanted to gain an understanding of the various aspects or practices of the principalship in order to ascertain the principals' training needs and thus be able to devise the best strategies to meet them. Murphy & Hallinger (1989) define training as any experience designed to promote the professional development of programme participants and for the purposes of this paper this is the all encompassing definition that I am using.

The findings of my research (Robertson, 1991) indicated that the principals faced many dilemmas in their daily practice particularly in relationship to instructional versus administrative leadership. Professional development through reflection on concrete experience was found to be the most effective form of learning for these professionals. Although experiencing some degree of isolation in their role they had
recognised the importance of networking with other principals of similar-sized schools. The recommendations included that the principals need assistance to become reflective practitioners and that experiential learning needs to form the basis of training and professional development offered to school leaders.

Argyris & Schön (1978) also outline the need for intervention in the organisational learning process. They state that it is important for leaders to be able to discover their personal theories-of-action, unlock them and learn a new theory which can help them slow down, and ultimately solve, many of the dilemmas and issues experienced by school leaders. Outside intervention is needed for this because the theory-in-use of a practitioner must be constructed from observations of behaviours, not simply by questioning how a person would behave in a certain situation.

To intervene is to enter into an ongoing set of relationships for the purpose of being of help. The kind of help on which we focus is to increase the capacity for good organisational dialectic - that is, the capacity for organisational inquiry which engages those mistakes, incongruities, and incompatibilities in organisational theory-of-action which necessarily emerge as the organisation/system changes. (p158)

An urban principal in the study advocated that type of reflection-relationship Barnett (1990) speaks of as peer-assisted leadership, where principals expand their knowledge through reflective practice, by observing one another and discussion centred on data gathered.

One principal was ready for this peer-assisted learning to take place:
What I would really like to do is to talk with other principals and perhaps buddy with someone. They would spend a day or two with me and then I would say "OK, warts and all, what can you see in here that I am doing wrong - tell me. What things do you like, what things am I doing that I can do better?" I wouldn't find that threatening if they were credible... it is good to get an outside view and diversify in that way. (Robertson, 1991, p89)

Another urban principal said that, in assessing their development needs, principals also needed to be told what they were doing well:
It is a tough one to generalise carte blanche the training needs for Principals. The first thing is the reinforcement that they are doing a good job. Having people being able to see the good in what they are doing rather than always be interacting with them about what yet needs to be done. (Robertson, 1991, p89)

School leaders often experience a degree of isolation in their schools and state that there are very few people with whom they can talk about leadership issues. Therefore, specially designed learning experiences such as professional partnerships between school leaders can stimulate reflective practice, thus increasing their professional knowledge base.
about administrative practice. Busy people typically do not engage in reflection. They rarely treat themselves to reflective experiences unless they are given some time, some structure, and the expectations to do so. (Killion & Todnem, 1991, p14)

Professional partnerships provides this structure for reflective practice to occur. Reflective practice seems to be the buzz word of the 1990’s literature on educational leadership development. However, as early as 1933 John Dewey was talking about reflective thinking in relation to the reflective process. More recently Donald Schön has become one of the theorists who strongly advocates the importance of reflective practice in the continued personal and professional development of school leaders.

In 1992, based on the findings on my earlier research, I have been working with 43 school leaders on a leadership development programme which is based on the setting up of partnerships. The school leaders selected their own partners, an important factor leading to the success of similar programmes (Barnett, 1990), where the participants observe each other within their respective schools and then reflect on their practices through a process of interviews. The training programme provides the school leaders with the skills, knowledge and framework for assisting them with their shadowing (observing each other’s practice) and the reflective interviews in each other’s schools.

The principals are encouraged to select a particular focus for their visits and to set personal and professional goals. The shadows provide valuable information for the appraisal process as to how well the goals have been met. Successful principals conduct their daily activities guided by their long term goals and the process of being observed and interviewed can serve as a stimulus for their professional growth. (Dwyer et al, 1985)

Principals daily practice in schools is complex and varied and the shadows provide the stimulus for discussions about leadership-in-action. The events of the day are brought to a conscious level for principals to begin to make sense of. Principals begin to make connections between theory and practice and increase their repertoires of how to act in particular situations in the future. One urban principal commented on the effectiveness of her partnership in helping to clarify her focus within the school:

The main thing is that this 'course' has been a catalyst for me with all the other things that have been floating around. It’s helped to redefine what I am actually doing as a principal. (FN Regional Meeting 18/8/92)

Principals are accountable to themselves and to their partners. One of the greatest difficulties for some of the partnerships this year has been setting aside the time needed to make the model of professional development work.

I have to make a set time for the shadow visit and then just walk out of the school. It is so easy to let other things come before your own professional development. However, I have discovered that the school continues without you. (FN Regional Meeting 18/8/92)
The model needs time, commitment and a developmental approach to allow the process to work. It wasn’t until after the second full group meeting and the second shadow that the principals began to see the full benefits of the model of professional development. Comments at the regional meetings of the principals included:

Long term, yes, because I see it as lengthy process. I tend to take on too many different things and it has been no exception this year and it has been very hectic trying to plot things in. So I’m not saying that to me it has been the most brilliant thing right now but I can see that it is going to grow with me... you can’t go it alone today, you just can’t....not if you want to stay with your head above water and sane.

(Rural male principal FN Regional Meeting 11/8/92)

I didn’t really see the value of it at the beginning. However, now I find it is the best professional development I have had in the past few years.

(Secondary Male Principal FN Regional Meeting 4/8/92)

The educational climate has been inimical to principal’s professional development activities. Often, they have been caught up in political issues and crises which have forced them to take the time allocated for other activities. Many of the political issues this year have included: bulk funding of teachers’ salaries and relief teachers’ salaries; contracts for senior staff; teacher strikes and absentees; and recapitation concerns.

One partnership involves a secondary principal of a large coeducational school and her deputy principal. She notes:

Because I was new to the school it has helped us to develop a working relationship. If we hadn't undertaken this in such a structured way I don't think that I would have felt as confident about where we were both coming from. We have been able to discuss not only what we were doing but why, and it has been invaluable in developing a working relationship...in understanding each other. (FN 4/8/92)

The deputy adds further clarification about the process of professional development they have been involved in:

There are two things ...it helps to gain an understanding of the other person and how they operate and it takes a while to feel comfortable about that and we had to establish a relationship where we were working together before we could start looking at each other's style. We have to be careful in our school as the third person in the Management team - the assistant principal - is conscious of the fact that our relationship is getting closer and closer because we are confiding more and more, and we have to make sure that we don't make her feel totally excluded which is why we are asking for feedback at this stage. But also it makes you look at yourself and how you operate. And from that we looked at how the senior management in the school operates. We took a look at the three styles and as the three of us have quite different styles we thought it was important to have a look at the responsibilities we each have and state 'her style fits these areas’, and so on, and assign responsibilities on that basis rather than saying ‘she's the Assistant Principal and he's the Deputy Principal and
she's the Principal so therefore they must do these jobs.’ (FN 4/8/92)
The principal concluded the discussion with her view on leadership
development:
I think the other thing too is that it makes it clear that leadership
doesn't just happen...that it actually can be learnt and that you can
always improve in leadership. So much of our education does tell us the
importance of learning and that we can teach and learn, but often we hit a
brick wall with personal development areas where basically you read a whole
book and you either have the method or you haven't...but this way you can
look at different features and definitely work at improvement. While you
don't want to change your whole personality and character there are
definitely areas that have been pointed out to me where I'm finding I want
to get moving on. (FN 4/8/92)
This principal and her deputy also gathered valuable data from members of
their staff on their leadership styles. They collated this data together,
searching for themes that they could use for their professional
developmental. They then set professional and personal goals and observed
each other in action to provide the necessary feedback for reflection on
progress towards their goals.

The partnerships have provided an arena in which principals can receive
positive reinforcement and affirmation - these opportunities rarely occur
in the principalship. One principal in this project commented thus:
Positive reinforcement is something I'd like to reiterate. Further up the
ladder you go the less positive response you often receive, partly because
of the nature of the job, so it's quite good to be able to give and hear
some congratulatory comments and you know they're genuine as you're also
quite prepared to give some quite negative ones. But pats on the back, are
nice to have. Recognition...that is definitely one of the spin offs. (FN
4/8/92)
The principals who have committed the suggested amount of time to
Partnerships have found that the contacts have been professionally very
useful. It has offered on-site training and a chance to get together with
colleagues and discuss visions and goals. Tentative findings suggest that
they have found it especially useful to be able to legitimately go into a
colleague's school and see in more depth how that principal operates.
Learning from the vicarious experiences of others as well as reflecting on
their own practices has enabled principals to clarify and understand their
knowledge about their leadership. There has been real appreciation by the
principals this year that this is something for principals in their
professional field and not yet more exaltation to be better managers.
How often have we heard teachers and principals lament "if only I didn't
have all this other stuff to do I could get on with being a great teacher
or principal?” Barth (1980, 185) realised that supposed obstacles to performing the job are the job. They represent not a barrier, but the means, the occasion for exercising good teaching and good administration. The principals need to be able to prioritise their own professional development and recognise the importance of being a reflective practitioner by allocating structured amounts of time to the process. Partnerships for this structured on-site reflection will then give principals the necessary guidance and support to develop their professional knowledge and their leadership skills in order to gain fulfilment and success in their day-to-day leadership of their school.

References


