Secondary School Principals as Curriculum Leaders: A New Zealand Study

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ABSTRACT
This study explores the perceptions of a group of secondary school principals with regard to their role as curriculum leaders – a term used synonymously with the notion of instructional or educational leadership denoting a focus on the primary purpose of the school. It was conjectured that the role expansion of principals, occasioned by the demand that they perform both a professional leadership and chief executive role in self-managed schools, would after a decade have a negative impact on the principal’s functioning as a curriculum leader. A focus group interview and three in depth interviews contributed data for this study. The analysis isolated factors which have a negative or positive impact on the principal’s ability to be an effective curriculum leader and strategies that the principals employed to strengthen the role. The results show that this group of principals see themselves primarily as curriculum leaders. Factors that militate against the role were those of high administrative workloads and external agency demands. Factors that supported them in performing this role were quality of teaching and management staff and school systems that enabled communication and distribution of responsibility for curriculum leadership. Strategies that enabled the task to be performed in spite of challenges included shared management, personal time management involving prioritising, developing others as curriculum leaders and performing indirect curriculum leadership tasks. A key issue that emerged in the study was the principal’s need to adopt a strategic orientation to curriculum leadership. Given the recent Ministry of Education requirements for schools to plan strategically with a focus on improving student achievement, and the increasing emphasis on forms of distributed leadership leading to school improvement, this study has some important messages for school leaders and those with an interest in their professional development.
Introduction

This study aimed to establish the extent to which a group of New Zealand secondary school principals considered themselves first and foremost curriculum (or educational) leaders, and explored their views of the extent to which they were effective in fulfilling and maintaining that role. It was intended to establish the main factors that had a negative impact on curriculum leadership, and the strategies the principals employed to diminish the strength of these obstacles, thereby increasing their effectiveness as curriculum leaders.

Today’s secondary principals carry an enormously varied workload, which in a self-managing environment includes human resource, financial and property management, and a range of other tasks such as marketing and seeking extra funds to improve school resourcing, all while being the professional leaders of the school. At the same time, there is a very demanding administrative workload to manage. The working day of the secondary school principal is characterised by a high rate of interruption, and is people-intensive. The principal must make sense of all this diverse activity in ways that achieve the purpose of the school, and which are congruent with the culture and underlying values of the organisation. By establishing the means by which the principals participating in this research study tried to sustain an effective curriculum leadership role in the midst of the variety, complexity and fragmentation that characterises their daily work, it was hoped that the findings of the study would be of practical benefit to principals, and to middle or senior managers aspiring to be principals.

Curriculum Leadership

The term ‘curriculum leadership’ is one term amongst several commonly used to describe leadership of a school’s core function. Literature that traverses the scope of the educational leadership task, termed variously academic leadership, professional leadership, instructional leadership and curriculum leadership or management, unfailingly points to the focus of the task: a concern with leading the primary activity of a school, namely the teaching-learning process. Authors who use the terms ‘educational leadership’ (Codd, 1989; Fullan, 2000; Hodkinson, 1991; Razik & Swanson, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1992), and transformational school leadership (Leithwood, 1994) emphasise the centrality of educational endeavour being the key concern of the school leader. These definitions invariably have a wider moral concern about the ends of education rather than the more instrumentally focused earlier descriptions of ‘instructional leadership’ (Duke, 1987; Donmoyer & Wagstaff, 1990; Harris, 1985; Weber, 1987). More recent descriptions of instructional leadership (Blase and Blase, 2000; Jantzi & Leithwood, 1999; Quinn, 2002; Southworth, 2002) mesh both the moral and visionary dimension with a practical focus on how leaders can influence teachers to make a difference to what happens in classrooms. The term ‘curriculum leadership’ is also in use and in some instances moves the focus beyond the principal to encompass the leadership that teachers themselves exert in their classrooms (Henderson & Hawthorn, 1995; McGee, 1997). In other cases the term is used synonymously with instructional leadership (Lee & Dimmock, 1999).

In this study the term ‘curriculum leadership’ has been employed because of its common usage by practitioners in New Zealand secondary schools to denote the particular emphasis placed on leading learning and teaching (or leadership related to
the curriculum and its delivery). It is this task that distinguishes a principal’s role from that of a chief executive in any other profession. As Southworth (2002) has pointed out, educational leaders must capably perform a dual role as chief executive (organisational leader and manager) and professional leader (educational leader). Rather than seeing these two dimensions as a dichotomy, they should be viewed as two sides of a coin in terms of a principal’s role in self-managed schools (Cardno, 1990; Hughes, 1985). In the New Zealand context there is little or no research into the conceptualisation and practice of this form of leadership, however there is research that shows that the principal’s role has changed and that a consequence for school leaders is the inability to focus on curriculum leadership to the extent they would prefer (Billot, 2001).

**Instructional leadership**

There are several researched conceptions of what it means to be an instructional leader. A vast literature is available from the 1980s onwards in relation to this concept, hailing mainly from the United States. It is a notion summarised in the seminal review of Weber (1987) and captured in more recent overviews (Blase & Blase, 1998; Hallinger & Heck, 1997; Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999). This term is also used in contemporary international literature (Wildy & Dimmock; 1993; Quinn, 2002; Southworth, 2002) to denote the significance of the influence a principal can exert on instructional improvement.

Instructional leadership on the one hand implies a direct and primary focus on instructional matters, yet on the other hand it is portrayed as a task that has a very broad array of concerns. It is not surprising that this rich literature is contradictory in relation to the scope of and the enactment of instructional leadership (Southworth, 2002) because there are multiple and growing demands on school leaders. As Fullan (2000) asserts:

> The job of the principal or any educational leader has become increasingly complex and constrained. Principals find themselves locked in with less and less room to manoeuvre. They have become more and more dependent on context. At the very time that proactive leadership is essential, principals are in the least favourable position to provide it (p. 156).

Two forms of analysis of this literature are useful in trying to come to terms with definitions that are often at variance. Firstly, there are views of instructional leadership as a tightly defined set of concerns that concentrate on the primary task itself and the opposing view that because instruction is impacted upon by many other variables, the principal must have a wider set of concerns. Secondly, and related to the first analysis categories of broadly or narrowly focused instructional leadership, is the view that instructional leadership can be direct, indirect or distributed.

**Curriculum Leadership in New Zealand**

This study uses the term ‘curriculum leadership’ in its broadest sense to mean the leading professional role as opposed to the chief executive officer role that was conferred on principals in the train of educational administration reform over a decade ago (Government of New Zealand, *Tomorrow’s Schools*, 1988). The term was adopted because it was felt that it would be meaningful for New Zealand secondary school principals who historically have used this term to describe their interest in and influence upon the mechanism that is at the centre of effective learning and teaching.
In the small available New Zealand literature, particularly in the official literature, this focus on leadership of the educational task is referred to more generally as ‘professional leadership’. However Ballard & Duncan (1989), in the earliest explanation of the principal’s role in the self-managed context, described the role as ‘instructional leadership’, one of three functions envisaged for principals of self-managed schools. The other two functions were an executive function of contributing to and carrying out board policy, and a reporting function. Thus the introduction of the Tomorrow’s Schools reforms signalled a move away from the principal as purely the leader of teaching and learning.

A broad description of professional leadership which stresses the principal’s accountability for learning experienced in a school is provided by Cardno (1990). Anticipating the way in which reform might reshape the principal’s role, she states:

The notion of the principal as ‘professional leader’ embraces the whole range of the principal’s responsibilities in the school. It is often a term used interchangeably with that of ‘educational leader’, implying that every facet of the organization which contributes to the educational endeavours of the staff and the educational experiences of the students is the principal’s responsibility (p.8).

Whilst the notion of professional leadership is used as an overarching concept, Cardno asserts that the “prime responsibility for leadership in an educational institution is also expressed in terms of ‘instructional leadership’. This means being a leader in terms of the learning-teaching facet which should be at the crux of all school leadership endeavour” (p. 8-9). A further dimension of the role is termed ‘organisational leadership’ “implying overall responsibility for the functioning of the school” (p. 9).

It was not until 1999 that the principal’s ‘new’ role in New Zealand schools was officially documented. This was achieved when a set of professional standards was established for the performance management of principals by the school’s governing body: the board of trustees (Ministry of Education, 1999). The standards comprise five dimensions: (1) professional leadership, (2) strategic management, (3) staff management, (4) relationship management and (5) finance and asset management.

The standard associated with professional leadership has six specific dimensions for secondary school principals. These are:

- demonstrates a thorough understanding of current approaches to effective teaching and learning
- provides professional direction to the work of others by encouraging vision and innovation in classroom practice and school organization
- analyses and makes effective, timely responses to school self-review, external audits and outcomes of student learning
- understands, and applies where appropriate, current practices for effective management form both within and beyond education
- fulfils the role of chief executive to the board of trustees as outlined in the performance agreement
- reflects on own performance appraisal and demonstrates a commitment to own ongoing learning in order to improve performance

(Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 27).
Methodology

Multiple methods were used to explain and understand the viewpoints of participants in this research. These choices were made because firstly, the nature of the research questions required the voice of principals themselves to be heard, and secondly, using more than one method would give richness to the data and heighten its validity. There was no intention to seek findings that could be generalised across the set of New Zealand secondary school principals (n=422); instead the research aimed to provide insights into the beliefs and experiences of a particular group of principals with the intention of offering these insights to other principals for reflection and translation to their own settings if appropriate. What was wanted in this case was the ‘rich but narrow’ insight offered by qualitative research, rather than the ‘broad but shallow’ overview that is sometimes provided by quantitative research (Davidson & Tolich, 1999, p. 116). Nevertheless, and albeit with a small sample, this study set out to answer the questions:

?? Did secondary school principals regard curriculum leadership as their primary role, and if so, how was this role enacted?

?? What did principals identify as obstacles to performing this role, and how were these obstacles overcome?

A brief questionnaire was mailed to thirty principals in a range of types of secondary schools throughout New Zealand. Fifteen principals responded, and from amongst the twelve principals who considered that curriculum leadership was indeed their central role (n=15), three were selected for in-depth, key-participant semi-structured interviewing by the researcher. A regular meeting of the Bay of Plenty Principals’ Association was utilised as an opportunity to invite all the secondary school principals in this region to participate in a focus group interview. Sixteen participants contributed data by this means. Both semi-structured interviews and the focus group discussion investigated the extent to which principals perceived themselves to be curriculum leaders in day-to-day practice; explored the obstacles to carrying out this specific role; and elicited from the principals the strategies they used to help them retain a primary focus on this role.

The combination of the three methods has enriched the story told by the principals and has enabled cross-checking between the findings from one data source against the others. This has increased the possibility of examining multiple realities to draw conclusions about the nature of curriculum leadership as conceptualised by the principals involved in the study.

Findings

Curriculum Leadership: The Primary Role

The large majority of the principals surveyed through questionnaire and interview did indeed consider curriculum leadership to be their primary role, and this was also the consensus of participants in the focus group discussion.
Of the fifteen principals who responded to the questionnaire, twelve answered that curriculum leadership was their primary role. The other three principals responded that they considered themselves to be curriculum leaders, but that this aspect was only part of their role and they adopted a wider primary focus, as the following example shows:

> My job is leadership of every dimension of the educational institution: the curriculum, the co-curriculum, pastoral care, resources including human resources and special character of the school. [QR13]

In support of the primacy accorded to curriculum leadership by twelve of the questionnaire respondents, and the three principals who were individually interviewed, the major reason given for this belief was that teaching/learning is the reason for the school’s existence. Because it is the organisation’s core business, the principal must assume the mantle of curriculum leader as the most important aspect of the role. While the role of the secondary school principal was a complex one, the great majority of tasks should be driven by the desire for high quality curriculum delivery. The following verbatim extracts from the questionnaire respondents indicate the strength of this belief.

> I believe it should be one of my most important roles, as educational institutions exist for learning and teaching. However, every teacher in a school must contribute to curriculum leadership. It is up to me to ensure that leadership opportunities are created and sought at all levels. [QR11]

> All other tasks reflect back onto curriculum. That drives the school and all aspects of my leadership/management are to promote curriculum. [QR12]

> It is the basis and core of a principal’s role. If it isn’t, a principal becomes an administrator. [QR5]

> Enabling students to learn is the primary function of the school. The principal leads the team who makes that happen. [QR6]

In relation to the main indicators of the enactment of the role by principals, the following are notable because there was consistency in these features being identified. As a direct form of curriculum leadership, classroom visits (where students and teachers were observed) were a significant means of showing the importance of teaching and learning for a majority of the principals. In some cases, principals demonstrated this further by themselves taking lessons, on either a regular or an occasional basis. This was in spite of the fact that principals were finding it more and more difficult to sustain active involvement in classrooms in the face of the ever-spiralling demands of the job in relation to workload and competing priorities. Several principals also indicated that they themselves led meetings about curriculum issues, and took pride in actively leading curriculum development planning and personally guiding specific initiatives to improve student achievement. This was the case even though other senior managers may have held oversight of curriculum and assessment as a specific responsibility. Finally, a desire common to virtually all the principals was to remain hands-on, visible leaders who took a full part in curriculum operations, rather than being viewed as desk-bound administrators.
At the same time, many of these principals also indicated that they performed several activities that could be classified as indirect curriculum leadership. For example, over half the principals indicated that they retained a broad oversight role with regard to the curriculum as with other areas of the school’s operation. They were utilising the structure of the school to delegate responsibility. A small number of principals indicated that they overviewed curriculum effectiveness through regular meetings with middle level curriculum managers, or delegated this responsibility by appointing deputies to specific positions such as Curriculum Director. Other activities that principals considered were curriculum leadership in action included disseminating curriculum-related material and initiating curriculum debate. Understanding and communicating national curriculum policy was also indicated by most of the principals as a task demonstrating curriculum leadership. A small number pointed out the importance of ensuring sufficient budget allocations to allow for high-quality curriculum delivery, including targeted professional development for both curriculum and leadership development. Nearly half the principals surveyed indicated the value of the role they played in appointing excellent staff and then influencing their development as curriculum leaders. This indirect aspect of curriculum leadership was strongly supported in the focus group and individual interviews as critical to effective leadership of learning and teaching. Finally, two questionnaire respondents, all three principals interviewed and the focus group participants identified the strategic nature of their approach to curriculum leadership. Examples of this were the need to communicate vision related to curriculum change and improvement to all stakeholders, the need to be a champion of academic excellence, and the need to carefully analyse achievement in order to review curriculum and plan necessary future improvements.

Factors Impacting Negatively on the Principal’s Role as Curriculum Leader

It was very clear from principals’ responses that workload, including its complexity and sheer size, was the factor that made it most difficult to perform the curriculum leadership role as effectively as they would like. Most commonly mentioned was the administrative workload, in particular accountability requirements of the Ministry of Education, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and the Education Review Office, much of which required substantial statistical, financial or other analysis. While some of the principals felt that such requirements were an unnecessary imposition representing a lack of trust, most appeared to accept them as necessary, though an often overwhelming aspect of the job that they neither enjoyed nor felt should be their priority.

Other aspects of workload that impinged on principals’ ability to successfully manage their curriculum leadership role included property and financial management, school marketing tasks, dealing with conflict (involving staff, students and parents), and the pace of change in the national education system, particularly in the area of assessment and qualifications.

The highly interrupted nature of the working day was frequently cited as working against effectiveness in the curriculum leadership role, interruptions including telephone calls and unexpected visitors, as well as a variety of unanticipated ‘fire-fighting’ tasks that were considered by them or by others to need urgent attention. This latter category of task was often related to student discipline.
Principals referred to the heavy demands on their time by others, including parents, staff, students, board members and community organisations. A further difficulty was the fact that these individuals and groups competed with each other, not just because they vied for the principal’s time and attention, but because they came from differing perspectives and had different motivations. Consequently, the principal faced the challenge of reconciling conflicting sets of goals to satisfy a range of stakeholders.

In summary these negative factors have been categorised as:

a) the scope of the job – its sheer size and complexity (with curriculum leadership being one facet among many others that demanded attention, and financial and property management often taking precedence over attention to curriculum);

b) the nature of the job – many interruptions and crisis demands (with paperwork, conflict management, resource juggling, and personal choices to engage in hands-on activities creating a workload that was difficult to time-manage); and

c) the expectations of others – urgent and often competing needs of stakeholders to be met (with high accountability demands from central agencies and the expectations of parents, students and staff that the principal will be available and effective in resolving their problems, adding to the complexity of the job and deflecting attention from the curriculum leadership role).

Factors Impacting Positively on the Principal’s Role as Curriculum Leader

The benefits of delegation and shared leadership were highlighted by most of the principals. Clear management structures with associated delegation of authority were designed expressly to ensure that there was sufficient focus on the central purpose of the school as well as on other important tasks. In some schools, curriculum development was a key responsibility of a senior manager, while in others, deputy or assistant principals had responsibility for other major tasks, especially day-to-day management and discipline, enabling the principal to concentrate more on the core function of teaching and learning. In still other cases, the hands-on, visible leadership was truly shared between all the senior managers, including the principal.

Irrespective of the principals’ individual concepts of shared leadership, there was wide acknowledgment that high quality teachers and middle managers were key elements in the effective implementation of the curriculum leadership role, and that principals’ potential workload was lightened by the desire of highly competent senior managers to share the leadership of the organisation, making for a more effective school.

In terms of principals’ individual capabilities, good time management was cited as a means for ensuring effectiveness as leaders. As would be expected, planning and prioritisation were the most common time management strategies used for ensuring that important tasks were dealt with, including those that were most urgent and those that were important for the future effectiveness of the school.

Principals’ own experience and training were cited as positive factors, including recent study in education management/leadership which had the advantage of providing a firm theoretical basis for their practice, as well as increased confidence to lead. Ongoing professional reading and research were needed to ensure that curriculum developments were understood, their opinions were well-informed, and to retain credibility as school leaders with staff, students, boards and parents.
Professional development, much-needed reflection time and personal support were gained from attendance at such events as local principals’ meetings and national conferences. The importance of professional collegiality in general, including professional relationships and interactions within the school environment, was identified as a factor facilitating the curriculum leadership role.

A personal passion for education and a determination to retain a teaching/learning focus were also cited by principals as factors in their success as curriculum leaders. While only a small minority of subjects of the research used the words “passion” and “love” in a direct fashion to describe how they felt about the primary function of the organisations which they led, the inference drawn from many of the principals’ descriptions of tasks and strategies was that they maintained a level of dedication and personal commitment that went beyond the bounds of a mere job description.

In summary the positive factors have been categorised as:
   a) the advantages of delegation – having structures and processes that allow sharing of the curriculum leadership tasks;
   b) the quality of staff – particularly at middle and senior management level so that delegations could be made confidently; and
   c) personal disposition and skills – based on paying attention to one’s own professional development in order to theorise and reflect on the curriculum leadership role and improve time management, coupled with a high level of dedication to and enthusiasm for academic goals.

Discussion

While most of the secondary school principals in the study firmly believed that their key role was curriculum leadership, it was evident that it was a challenge to maintain a clear focus on this professional role while at the same time carrying out the functions of a chief executive officer. Fullan’s (2000) view that the increasing complexity of the role and its associated constraints place principals in a poor position to be educational leaders, while being a rather more pessimistic view than that of most of the principals in the study, was echoed in their concerns about the ‘crowding out’ of direct involvement in the school’s core function by other management concerns. As one participant in the study expressed it, albeit in a typically New Zealand understatement, “The elastic’s got a bit stretched”.

Rejecting Inappropriate Notions of Instructional Leadership

The narrow conception of instructional leadership with its specific set of tasks or concerns directly influencing teaching and learning, such as those implicit in models provided by Duke (1987) and Harris (1985) appears to be neither advisable nor feasible in the current New Zealand secondary school environment. Weber’s composite model (1987) is a little closer to reality within this context, as it encompasses tasks with a less direct influence over the school’s core function; however, the job description of today’s principal is still far more wide-ranging than that postulated by Weber. Even when we look at recent research such as the Blase and Blase (2000) study that investigates the strength of instructional leadership in the dimensions of resource provider, instructional resource, communicator and visible presence, there is an assumption of direct engagement with teachers and participation
in classrooms. Hence the relevance of their findings for secondary schools is questionable. Donmoyer and Wagstaff’s (1990) argument was that the wider managerial aspects of a principal’s job impact on the quality of curriculum delivery, and that therefore the principal can be both manager and instructional leader. This conception has application to the New Zealand scene if senior and middle managers are included as instructional/curriculum leaders along with the principal, especially in the case of larger secondary schools.

Of concern are findings indicating that secondary school principals are attempting to practise curriculum leadership through personal engagement in classroom observation and by taking on teaching tasks themselves. Here we have evidence of well-intentioned but outmoded efforts to enact a view of instructional leadership that Leithwood (1994) indicates was never intended for the secondary school anyway. It is not surprising then, to hear that many principals feel overburdened.

**Conceptualising a Realistic Form of Curriculum Leadership**

What then should curriculum leadership in New Zealand secondary schools encompass and how should it be enacted? Answering these questions with reference to the data collected in this study could shape a new, more realistic and current concept of the role, and lead to an attempt to describe how principals can enact the role in a time-effective manner, given their other responsibilities and the structure and culture of secondary schools. Kleine-Kracht (1993) asserts that principals must make choices about the way in which they will lead curriculum. In his view, the indirect instructional leader is a facilitator of leadership by others, choosing not to engage directly on curriculum tasks or projects.

Indirect instructional leadership leaves the principal with the responsibility for providing resources (human and physical) to maximise the effectiveness of teaching and learning in the school, and leaves the management of curriculum to others. This is a task highlighted in the literature as the dimension of 'resource provider' (Blase and Blase, 2000). The principal would also be responsible for gaining agreement to broad curriculum goals as part of developing the school’s academic vision, which is implemented in turn by curriculum leaders at other levels. Jantzi and Leithwood (1996) include as their first dimension of instructional leadership the need to identify and articulate a vision. According to Johnson and Scholes (2002) a visionary orientation is at the very heart of being strategic.

In adopting an indirect form of instructional leadership principals would, therefore, capitalise on two main features: firstly, delegating the task or distributing curriculum leadership; and secondly, adopting a visionary and analytical approach to strategic curriculum leadership. The findings of this study indicate that some principals are already practising both these forms of curriculum leadership to varying degrees. There is evidence from almost all of the principals in this study that they are distributing curriculum leadership responsibility to others in some form (yet at the same time many of them are also still engaging in direct forms of curriculum leadership). Less than half the principals provided evidence of engaging in strategic forms of curriculum leadership (yet the professional standards promulgated as the basis for judging their performance provides clear direction as to the importance of this strategic management dimension of the role).
Distributed Curriculum Leadership
Oversight of school-wide curriculum and assessment practice is most often a specific responsibility designated to a deputy or assistant principal, as was the case in all the medium-sized and large secondary schools that took part in this study. The creation of structures, systems and resources that enhanced learning, and development of a school culture that encouraged and supported continual improvement in curriculum delivery and assessment, was viewed by almost all participants as key roles of the principal and other senior managers.

Principals may need to be assured that describing the curriculum leadership role as indirect leadership of teaching and learning does not diminish its crucial importance. The impracticality of direct instructional leadership in the secondary school environment was recognised by Leithwood (1994), who noted that the size and complexity of most secondary schools, together with the high-level specialist knowledge required in diverse areas of learning, meant that opportunities for principals to have hands-on involvement in the instructional programme are very limited. On the other hand, the work of middle managers such as heads of faculty and department clearly has a very direct influence on curriculum and assessment in their specialist areas of learning. Empowerment of these staff as ‘leaders of learning’ as advocated by Kliene-Kracht (1993) and the adoption of the transformational, visionary approach to leading curriculum advised by Leithwood (1994) are not just a practicable options, but essential within the secondary school context.

Strategic Curriculum Leadership
Principals in this study portrayed themselves as dedicated to implementing measures that supported the school’s primary purpose. They maintained a wide overview of operations and, amid the plethora of daily events and problems, aimed to be the institution’s ‘sense-makers’. This should mean keeping the school’s vision and goals at the forefront, so that staff and students have a frame of reference for their behaviour, their actions and their decisions. This said, the ‘busyness’ and complexity of daily activity for the participants in the study meant that the way to the future was in danger of being an increasingly blurred image. In such an environment, success as a curriculum leader depended on a determination to maintain teaching and learning as the paramount consideration underpinning decision-making, to think strategically and to translate vision into future-oriented action for the betterment of the school.

Recent regulatory amendments in the form of the Education Standards Act (Government of New Zealand, 2001) require schools to give priority to strategically planned improvements in student learning outcomes. Such a focus on academic goals is developed and sustained by school leaders who have the ability, clarity of vision and commitment to see beyond business as usual and day-to-day events toward implementing strategic initiatives and achieving targeted gains in student learning. Principals in this study indicated engagement in the following activities that could be broadly construed as strategic because they shape and support implementation of long-term plans for the improvement of student achievement:

?? undertaking regular school self-review of curriculum areas;
?? facilitating regular analysis of relevant internal data;
?? deciding the issues to prioritise in the face of changing government focus; and
?? developing with staff a shared vision and goals related to student learning.
Recognising Curriculum Leadership

A more productive and realistic view of curriculum leadership for New Zealand secondary school principals would be indirect in form and function. It would feature the distribution of leadership for curriculum to those closest to the point of influencing what goes on in classrooms: the middle management (Head of Department) level of the school. It would be leadership that is strategic rather than operational, focusing on meeting the expectations of the professional standards for ‘professional leadership’ and ‘strategic management’. These standards imply a hand-off role for the principal in relation to leading the curriculum. Rather than personal hands-on engagement in the tasks of curriculum leadership, what is expected is a demonstration of understanding of critical knowledge, the provision of resources and the enabling and direction of others so that key tasks can be accomplished in a distributed and effective manner.

However it is also an official expectation that the principal will be recognised as a curriculum leader (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 29). Principals in this study indicated that it was also intrinsically important for them to be visible and for them this meant getting personally involved in curriculum delivery activity. Given that expectations held of a principal as a curriculum leader by staff have most likely been strongly influenced by the performance of direct activities by principals in the past, a major challenge for those performing a reconceptualised role will be the clarification and communication of the nature of this changed role to others. What will also be required is the internalisation by school leaders themselves of new criteria inherent in the performance of this somewhat different role. The nature of the principal’s visibility might well change as a consequence from being seen in classes to being seen as the champion of school-wide strategic opportunities to improve curriculum outcomes.

Conclusion

Principals in this study have indicated that they want curriculum leadership to remain as the primary role of the New Zealand secondary school principal. However, while it is unarguably the most important professional role and the one that distinguishes an educational leader from a chief executive in any other kind of operation, it cannot be the only role the principal performs. Nor can it continue to be performed in the way many principals described in this study; that is in a direct form that exacerbates the problems which attend an already overstretched workload in a job that is complex and highly demanding.

It is our conjecture that principals are already, in many cases, appreciating and acting upon the need to demonstrate their capability in terms of the professional standards and to retain their declared commitment to keeping curriculum issues paramount. The meshing of two sets of standards, those for ‘professional leadership’ and ‘strategic management’ (Ministry of Education, 1999, p.27) provide the basis for our proposal that curriculum leadership in New Zealand secondary schools can be recognised when principals engage in the following:

1. Distribute the responsibility for curriculum management (including staff appraisal and development) to Heads of Department or Faculty, and share curriculum overview with senior managers;
Utilise management structures to maintain an oversight of and accountability for curriculum;
Appoint excellent staff;
Provide resources and information;
Enable analysis and review of curriculum;
Plan strategically for the improvement of student achievement;

The choice to make a shift from direct to indirect curriculum leadership belongs to the principal. Some may find it difficult because of the loss of certain satisfying rituals such as coaching teachers and demonstrating expertise to a class, activities that in spite of making workload more onerous, have always made direct instructional leadership so personally rewarding. We predict that a further challenge will be the need to communicate the changed nature of the role and the rationale for reconceptualising it to key stakeholders; namely, the board of trustees and the staff. We know from the responses of principals in the study that one of the key stressors in the daunting job of principalship is being misunderstood and undervalued. Unless employers and professional colleagues know exactly what the principal is setting out to achieve, it is unlikely that they can judge the success that could attend the practice of a more appropriate, strategic form of curriculum leadership in a secondary school.

References


