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# Spotlight on leadership

## *An interview with Professor Viviane Robinson*

**Sarah Boyd**

It was her own three-year stint as head of The University of Auckland's School of Education that really sparked Viviane Robinson's interest in leadership.

"That sort of experiential, gut-level feeling for it gave me a much stronger sense that there was more to be said about what leadership involved."

Professor Robinson is an organisational psychologist, so she had long been interested in how organisations tick, how they learn and how they deal with mistakes, as well as in the communication processes that make them work better.

"As an organisational psychologist, I came to questions of educational leadership and administration quite late. Now I'm more and more convinced that there is something distinctive about educational leadership—it needs to be very strongly grounded in the core business of teaching and learning." In other words, educational leadership draws heavily on domain-specific expertise. We cannot assume that school leaders have enough knowledge of assessment, curriculum and pedagogy and that they only need generic leadership preparation.

Her conviction comes from the enormous body of work involved in the Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) project on educational leadership that she and colleagues won the contract to write in 2006. Although the Ministry of Education has yet to publish the full report, the findings have been well signalled and published in a number of places, including in a resource kit for teachers. (The publications available are listed at the end of this article.)

Professor Robinson and her colleagues Dr Margie Hohepa and Dr Claire Lloyd began by reviewing all the literature on educational leadership. Of the hundreds of thousands of papers on the subject, only a handful looked at the relationship between leadership and student achievement, which was the focus of the BES.

After a careful review of the material it became clear that the question, "Does school leadership make a difference to student outcomes?" was the wrong question. Leadership itself does not make a difference to student achievement, but certain leadership practices do.

"The impact of school leaders depends on what they do. We have good evidence about what they need to be doing to make a difference."

All the evidence the BES writers drew on to identify the impact of particular leadership practices on student outcomes was international, as there were no relevant New Zealand studies. However, the recently published BES on teacher learning and professional development

(Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007) provided some indirect evidence about New Zealand school leadership, as it identifies interventions in New Zealand schools that had made a positive difference to student achievement. The writers of the leadership BES honed in on the role of leadership in those initiatives, seeking to single out a leadership dimension and compare it with what had been identified internationally.

"The New Zealand evidence is much more indirect," Viviane says. "But it is important and it gives a couple of strands to the story that did not emerge from the international research. In Māori-medium education, for example, leadership that can effectively engage the community with an educational agenda is particularly important."

The big message from the international and the New Zealand work is that the more leaders focus on the core business of improving teaching and learning, the bigger the impact will be on student outcomes. It's one of the first lessons she picks out as important for practitioners.

But of course there's an obvious follow-up: To what extent does the New Zealand school environment allow leaders to gain and maintain that kind of focus?

"On the whole, the environment in which school leaders are working is very challenging in terms of that focus," she says. She reels off the tasks that can steer principals away from the core business: health and safety requirements; endless requests for information; working with the board of trustees on finance, property and marketing.

She believes there needs to be more support for the school leadership team, on a sustained and regular basis. That would be too expensive to replicate in every school, which means the Tomorrow's Schools model needs to evolve. It's another of her key messages—the self-managing school model is not sacred.

"I think we've got to get over this oppositional discussion between our current model of self-managing schools or the highly centralised and bureaucratic system we had before. There are many alternatives in between. We've had Tomorrow's Schools for 19 years—surely we have learnt something about how to change the system so we achieve better outcomes for all students."

There is much to learn from overseas, she says, pointing to Ontario, which has a strong district-support system in which every principal can count on regular meetings with colleagues, and a partnership approach to the review of student achievement and the development of the capacity needed to meet student needs. "We have the notion of a school district

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as somehow being a hierarchical layer. We've got to start thinking about local districts as partners—as sharing the responsibility with school leaders to locate and build the capacity needed to meet the needs of students in every school."

In New Zealand, clusters have helped build connections between schools, but she questions how sustainable they are. They are voluntary, initiative-based and constantly changing, rather than a permanent part of the infrastructure.

Nor does she pin her hopes on a mentor model for school leaders, though it's an important part of the First-time Principals Programme of which she's the academic director.

"We have a cohort of about 50 experienced principals as mentors in the First-time Principals Programme. They are outstanding leaders—and experienced principals have also asked that such a mentoring scheme be available to them. I think it's a great idea but once again it targets individual leaders rather than improving the capacity of the whole system. What about those principals and schools who don't want to be part of a cluster or to have a mentor? They may be adding value to their students or they may not—we often don't know until it is far too late. In the interim they are on their own with no support system around them unless they create one."

Viviane supports the planned new initiatives in leadership development for aspiring and experienced principals. They should be accompanied, she argues, by a robust evaluation of what effect the programmes are having on leadership capacity in this country, and where the gaps are.

So what makes a good leader? A leader should be confident in leading discussions about curriculum, assessment and pedagogy. "You'd want them to know whether a reading or writing programme is on track. You'd want them to be able to explain and defend the theory of effective teaching that informs their school's teacher-appraisal and classroom-observation procedures."

It's a mix of skills, knowledge and dispositions which—and this is her third key message—reside in the leadership team rather than just one person.

"If you think about the leadership team in a school, what is the capacity of that team in terms of knowledge of pedagogy and assessment? What's the depth of education knowledge that is available to the team? Is it sufficient to meet the learning needs of their students? Whose job is it to find out? And whose job is it to provide timely support to a team which has important gaps in its capacity? Those are some of the questions that I

think we need to debate when considering the next stage in the evolution of Tomorrow's Schools."

### Three key messages

1. The more leaders focus on the core business of improving teaching and learning, the bigger their impact on student outcomes.
2. The self-managing school model should not be treated like a sacred cow—it needs to evolve to meet current needs.
3. Effective school leadership resides in the leadership team, not just in one individual.

### Reference

Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barrar, H., & Fung, I. (2007). *Teacher professional learning and development: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration*. Wellington: Ministry of Education. <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515/15341>

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