

School leadership in a post-disaster setting

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KEY POINTS

- A post-disaster setting increases both the level of challenge facing leaders, and the opportunities to learn.
- Leaders in a post-disaster setting rely on personal connections and professional networks to deal with heightened levels of change and uncertainty.
- Conscious leadership—knowing what you stand for and why—is crucial to steering a path through uncharted territory.
- How well leaders adapt to changing conditions (for example, through increased delegation and shared leadership approaches) is a key determinant of success in a crisis context or period of extended change.

This article stems from a 2016 research project that examined the leadership experiences of 20 primary principals in greater Christchurch. The study was based on the belief that the nature of successful leadership needs to change in a post-disaster setting. The article focuses on what principals learned about leadership from these experiences, highlighting the stories of four participants. The findings indicate that successful school leadership in a crisis context relies on making good use of support networks and collaborative professional relationships, maintaining a strong link to one's core beliefs, being fully aware of the impact of your leadership, and responding accurately and with agility to constant change.

Introduction

Every day, principals are charged with leading our education system in situations where aspirations are converted to action and policy unfolds as practice. Parents, communities, and governments look to principals to get the best from teaching and learning for today's children and society's future. Principals face diverse and multiple demands under normal conditions. These increase substantially during times of crisis or unexpected, extended periods of change.

On 4 September 2010 a 7.1 magnitude earthquake began a series of major earthquakes across Canterbury that lasted until December 2011. Over 10,000 aftershocks have continued into 2016. The levels of damage and disruption to life have been well documented. What may be less well known is the additional ongoing disruption and level of change caused to the city's schools by decisions made regarding the rebuild and recovery of the city, and the resulting impacts this has had on school leadership.

A disaster disrupts the ordinary. Systems, infrastructure, organisations, relationships, and decision making are all tested and usually need to be modified. New legal arrangements often appear, and specific laws are sometimes enacted to respond to the extraordinary circumstances that emerge. Schools in greater Christchurch traded the ordinary for the extraordinary as the recovery and renewal of education across the city unfolded.

Following the 22 February 2011 earthquake schools responded to an emergency context, to changing community needs, and to initial disruptions to business as usual. This saw a significant shift towards programmes and practices that supported wellbeing for children, families, and staff. In 2013 the Education Review Office produced a report based on information

gathered from schools and early childhood centres during 2012. This report stated that:

The school was seen as a vital hub in the local community not only for the families attending the school, but also the wider community. Giving to others and connecting with the community was a very positive outcome of the crisis [for schools] created by the Canterbury earthquakes (p. 2).

From mid-2012 plans unfolded for the closure or merger of over 30 schools. In 2013 the schools' rebuilding programme began to be implemented, involving over 100 schools. This included the accelerated introduction of what were initially termed "modern learning environments" and the teaching practices associated with this direction. Shifts towards the increased use of digital technologies in learning were also accelerated. Other sector reforms included the introduction in 2013 of new school cluster arrangements, learning community clusters, and enrolment zones across the city. There were also reviews of the provision for Years 7 and 8 children, of special education facilities and of the arrangement of technology centres. The introduction of the Community of Learning/Kāhui Ako model added to the set of changes from 2015.

Of these changes, two events shaped the period investigated in this study more than any other. First there was the announcement by the Government in September 2012 of the school reorganisation for Christchurch, whereby it was proposed that 13 schools would close and another 18 would merge. (Other changes were also signalled that day.) Second, the Christchurch Schools Renewal programme was released late in 2013, in which the Government announced plans to spend over \$1 billion on the rebuild, redevelopment, and renewal of over 100 Christchurch schools. This initiated the development

of modern learning environments and shifts towards increasingly collaborative teaching practices.

Christchurch schools embarked on change at a level not previously experienced. Just as a principal got his or her head around one proposed change or reform (e.g., for a school merger), another one popped up (e.g., the introduction of learning community clusters or enrolment zones). The extent of change was felt citywide and could not have been anticipated by school leaders when the first earthquake struck in September 2010.

Methods

From late 2015 to mid-2016 I gathered information from 20 primary school principals in greater Christchurch regarding their experiences of leadership during this extraordinary period. I first interviewed 10 principals and then gathered survey responses from 10 others to help determine whether the themes I was initially identifying were indicative of widely held experiences. Of the 20 principals involved, nearly all had over 5 years' experience of school leadership, with most having been a principal for over 10 years. Eight were female and 12 male. Their schools were located across the greater Christchurch area and represented all decile levels (eight from lower decile schools, six each from mid- and upper levels). The schools involved ranged in size from around 100 students to over 600. The names and other details about principals mentioned in this article have been altered to help protect their anonymity.

This research was shaped by my own experience as a principal of a Christchurch primary school since mid 2012 and my interest in building a better understanding of effective leadership within this post-disaster context.

Four questions guided this research and provide the structure for the remainder of this article:

1. What factors most supported principals' leadership?
2. What have been the barriers to successful leadership?
3. What lessons did principals learn about leadership?
4. What recommendations would principals make to others?

Findings

What most supported principals' leadership?

Trust-based relationships with those who share leadership experiences dominated principals' responses about what supported them in crisis and post-disaster mode. Most principals discussed the importance of being able to talk with people who understood the issues they were facing. Having a trusting relationship with the board chairperson, with their leadership team, mentors or

appraisers, or through principal networks appears to have been a critical factor in how well principals succeeded in coping with increasing demands and the unexpected nature of this context. One principal succinctly summed up the views of others: "Your networks are more important than ever."

Many participants referred to using multiple sources of guidance and information, tapping into more than one network for support. Several referred to quickly growing their knowledge base over this time, enabling them to make better decisions. For example, greater knowledge and better connections helped these principals to know when to stand firm and when to bend in the breeze. They credited this learning to the value gained from networking with diverse colleagues.

Most principals believed that it was essential to have a cohesive leadership team throughout this extended period of change. Some lamented its absence at certain points, but most were thankful to experience close, cohesive working relationships with their senior leaders. As one stated, "I am not alone as a leader." Cohesion didn't happen by accident. Principals spoke of their deliberate efforts to foster a more collaborative leadership style and support the development of senior leaders, often by involving them in key meetings, discussions, and moments where unity could be forged.

CASE STUDY 1

Joe was appointed to his principal position during 2011. The school had long-established systems and practices which Joe began to review with other leaders and staff shortly after being appointed. This resulted in a period of open, shared decision making leading to changes in leadership structures and curriculum design. Joe felt that this early, shared change process better enabled him and his staff to confront the increasing level of change that emerged when the Christchurch Schools Renewal programme and the implementation of modern learning environments began to unfold from 2013. As Joe noted, "Change was in our DNA." He also valued one-to-one conversations with all staff to help build trust in both the change process and his leadership.

Having a cohesive leadership team that already modelled collaborative practice (working in a shared leadership space) and who already took a "blank page" approach to problem solving and change management with staff members placed them ahead of the game. Joe found that providing staff with as much information as possible about a decision helped everyone to see the big picture, and to be assured that no hidden agenda lay behind decision making. He further noted that "I've made some good mistakes" that placed him in a stronger position for what came next. Joe learned to "never assume" what people know or are thinking in times of change. He also emphasised the value of solutions being arrived at through an inclusive, consensus process.

Joe believed that these approaches, solidifying a shared direction, helped his leadership as the Christchurch Schools Renewal programme began to present challenges. In addition, he regularly tapped into external networks and involved external facilitators to help lead discussions with

staff and to strengthen the leadership team. He valued meeting a wide range of other principals at conferences, when visiting other schools, and through being involved in principal groups, using these colleagues as a sounding board for challenging or new situations.

Joe referred to an “internal well” of knowledge and experiences that supported his leadership. He felt that he didn’t adopt one style of leadership but intuitively adapted to the circumstances. Joe grew in confidence as a leader as he collaborated with staff on unexpected challenges, sought views from his wider networks, and got to know himself better as a leader. He became more at ease with the realisation that he couldn’t know everything.

What were the barriers to successful leadership?

Participants identified some significant barriers to their leadership in this post-disaster context. These included increasing multiple demands, external decision making, the Christchurch Schools Renewal programme, and the accelerated move to modern learning environments. Staff and student wellbeing, the unprecedented developmental needs of groups of younger children, and direct impacts from the earthquakes on school communities all challenged principals.

External decisions often led to unforeseen circumstances that unsettled relationships and dominated principals’ leadership attention. For example, the merger and closure proposals caused significant disruption to those involved, and new school cluster arrangements interrupted previous cross-school relationships. Two participants became principals of new schools that emerged from very contentious merger processes, where communities had become disrupted and divided. Not surprisingly, their leadership roles became more challenging. Instead of leading developments in curriculum or pedagogy, they focused on repairing relationships, building a new staff culture, community engagement, and school unity.

Several participants mentioned principals’ wellbeing as being a concern. Some found themselves stretched more than ever before. One noted that “2014 was the most difficult year of my career.” Another observed that “The job I’m doing is vastly different to the one I signed up to,” while a third commented, “The job has become so complex. The expectations on us are huge.” Some principals believed that expectations from the Ministry of Education were at times unrealistic (in relation to the capacity to manage ongoing change) and that support for schools facing heightened levels of children’s needs (especially challenging behaviours) and for those entering the Christchurch Schools Renewal programme had been inadequate. “They need to be delivering more personalised solutions for schools.”

CASE STUDY 2

Sue had been in her position for several years prior to 2011. The earthquakes resulted in unexpected and ongoing roll growth for Sue’s school. A significant increase in the number of children with challenging behaviours and those needing specific interventions regarding their social and emotional learning—probably related to earthquake trauma—created unprecedented demands on staff and school resources. From 2014 the Christchurch Schools Renewal programme presented another set of challenges at the school. These were compounded as delays in the building programme dragged on into 2015. Sue felt there was inadequate support for what staff members were facing, especially with regard to special education needs and the rapidity of reforms being fostered by the Government. In her view, Ministry staff “needed to come to our school and walk in our footsteps”. This sentiment was echoed by several other principals, although most also stated that local Ministry staff were responding in a more helpful way to what they were hearing from schools during 2015.

Sue actively sought and made effective use of several principal networks and a mentor for leadership support. She involved an external facilitator in staff professional learning and development (PLD) and visited other schools across a wide area to help map the path ahead.

Sue used staff responses to a challenging situation to help determine how change was being managed. Due to overcrowding from roll growth, some teachers moved into shared teaching arrangements, resulting in greater collaboration about programmes and practices. When a temporary building arrived to help alleviate the situation, these staff members chose to continue their collaborative experience rather than return to single-cell spaces. Sue arranged for them to speak at staff meetings about what they were experiencing and this captured the interest of others. Sue backed what was happening by arranging the removal of walls between classes to allow more teachers to trial modern learning environment settings. The shift towards modern learning environments and collaborative practice was largely being driven from the bottom up, in an organic process that helped prepare the way for the introduction of the Christchurch Schools Renewal programme.

This experience reinforced Sue’s view that “I’m only as good as the people around me” in relation to managing change. She also discovered, “I’m more of a risk taker than I thought I was!” Finally, she reflected on the need to slow down during a time of rapid, extensive change, “But it’s hard to do.”

What did principals learn about leadership?

Experience is not what happens to you; it’s what you do with what happens to you. (Aldous Huxley)

Three-quarters of principals commented that they had changed their leadership approach in some way during this period. The post-disaster context required them to look more closely at their interpersonal skills, their beliefs and values, their support bases, and their ability to delegate. Nearly all spoke about what they had learned about themselves as a leader, and most believed that they approach leadership differently as a result of the earthquakes. They increased their understanding about how change unfolds across a school and the sector, they

focused more on staff wellbeing, and they learned more about how to approach problem solving, decision making, and risk taking. Overall, most seemed to become more reflective and adaptive leaders.

Principals also came to recognise their own limitations. As one exclaimed, “I can tell you what not to do”. Their comments indicate they accepted that there was a limit to their capacity to manage what was being asked of them. Some principals realised not only that they couldn’t know everything in such an extraordinary context, but also that they had to avoid claiming to know more than they did. Some questioned the belief that principals should be involved in all PLD and school developments, expressing the view that at that time it was simply unrealistic. “With a united leadership team it [involving the principal] becomes unnecessary” was one principal’s conclusion.

“Look after your staff, they’ve been through a lot” was another sentiment echoed by many. Striking a balance regarding how leaders involved staff in the change process was seen as crucial. Principals recognised that staff were dealing with a demanding new set of circumstances on a daily basis in relation to children’s learning needs and the shift towards new practices. How much more do they need to know and be drawn into? How does a principal filter information so that staff are informed but not overloaded? There is no one answer to these questions, but the survey participants felt that it is important that principals consider them carefully.

CASE STUDY 3

According to **Mark**, the earthquakes and their aftermath disrupted the school’s development path. He had taken up his position at the school a few years prior to the earthquakes and had been successfully working with staff to address some challenges the school had been facing. Over the pre-earthquake period Mark had secured a mandate for change and established a strong, service leadership style. He’d worked with the whole school community to set a shared vision for school development, and staff were exploring collaborative modern learning environments as part of that shared vision. Innovation was encouraged and supported, including through visits to other schools and attendance at conferences. Some physical changes were made to classrooms, and careful consideration had been given to the make-up of teaching teams.

The earthquakes interrupted the momentum of these developments. For example, a site-sharing arrangement occurred in 2011 as they hosted another school for several months. Community anxiety levels, changes in students’ behaviour, along with circumstances that some staff members were facing outside of school all resulted in progress being stalled. In Mark’s view, “Staff began to hunker down” and “Things go wrong when we get away from our vision.” A crucial leadership step for getting through this period was bringing people back to the core beliefs they had previously worked on.

One critical moment for Mark was being introduced to the concept of the “Power of Three” in relation to collaborative

practices and team design. This was one of several crucial ‘ah ha!’ moments for him as he searched for ways to take staff forward again on a path of reform. Mark identified three critical leadership actions that helped to regain momentum: getting alongside staff individually; becoming more mobile and visible around the school; and enabling some staff to lead change. “It can fall over if the principal doesn’t let it evolve,” said Mark.

Mark began to consciously step back from being at the centre of problem solving. Previously he had tended to rescue situations and people had come to rely on him to guide them through difficult moments. Mark made the decision to turn this around by empowering other key staff to be leaders in problem solving or in difficult situations. As a result they became better placed to meet the next challenge.

What did these principals recommend to others?

Although no one-size-fits all recommendations emerged from this study, principals emphasised some core beliefs about effective leadership. Participants regularly highlighted aspects of leadership such as delegation across the leadership team, being clear as a leader about your moral purpose or values, and gathering support bases and other perspectives from your networks to help inform you. One principal summed this up as follows: “An already tough job gets tougher in a crisis. Accept it and ask for help.”

One key recommendation was for leaders to be clear about where you stand and what you stand for. One principal managing multiple changes stated, “You need a thick skin and a strong moral compass.” For nearly all principals, effective leadership relied on clear, well-informed decision making and being alert to the impact their decisions have on others and on the school’s vision. As one principal asked, wherever and whoever pressures may be coming from, “Can you draw a line back to your core vision?”

Principals were urged to continually and actively manage change (especially in a setting where externally led change was prevalent), but to balance this with allowing enough time to embed initiatives already underway. As one suggested, “Find that balance between change and consolidation.” In an ever-changing environment, participants suggested, leaders need to take safe risks (“Innovation often comes out of bravery”), and not underestimate the importance of small steps taken over time (“You’re always being noticed”).

Principals cautioned about the rate of change and the possible fragmentation that can arise from moving too quickly, where part of the staff or school systems arrive in a different place to others: “Take care with the pace of change not to open up two schools”, and “Take time to learn about how change unfolds for others,” echoed these sentiments.

Most principals emphasised the importance of getting away from one's immediate context to help broaden one's perspective. This included visiting schools in other places, becoming involved in a different network, or undertaking a sabbatical period for a term. Several principals also endorsed the need to allow other leaders among the staff to emerge during a period of change and to encourage them to take the initiative.

The Ministry of Education made available one full-time equivalent mentor role, in co-operation with the Canterbury Primary Principals Association, to help support principals in Christchurch from 2013. A significant number of principals felt this was a great initiative that supported and guided successful leadership. Principals recommended that more mentors be made available to support principals as the Christchurch context continues to unfold.

Problem-solving and decision making processes have been placed under pressure not only for principals within this post-disaster context. There is an ongoing challenge for the Government to ensure it is being accurate and agile in its responses to school needs in this setting. Principals recommended that the Government make sure that it closely monitors the impact of its decisions and actions on the sector, especially on school leadership, and in turn on outcomes for learners. "Walk a mile in our shoes" was a sentiment expressed regularly, especially in regard to the impact of the CSR programme and the roll out of MLEs.

CASE STUDY 4

Like other principals in this study, **Mary** is a connector, someone who seeks out new ideas and experiences: "I believe you need to get out of the context you're in." Mary noted that "My response to change has been enhanced by the changes inflicted on us."

Mary's school experienced some initial roll decline and staff turnover, but generally the school was able to continue business as usual. As she noted, "We were able to get on with it. Property or other issues didn't sideline us." The school and its cluster embarked on considerable joint work from 2013, developing a vision for learning and teaching that was shared across schools. "There were few disparities that would pull the cluster apart."

Mary appreciated the supportive circumstances she found herself in. Good relational trust was built among the principals, and this extended to boards sharing common aspects in their school charters. This principal and group of schools took advantage of the circumstances they found themselves in to pursue a shared development opportunity. The local Ministry of Education staff encouraged and supported these initiatives.

Mary pursued various professional networks and connections beyond Christchurch to help inform her thinking, participating in various conferences and online forums and taking opportunities to visit schools internationally. She participated actively in her local principal association and embraced future-focused inquiry in her thinking and practice.

Although her immediate school context differed to that of many of the other principals in this study, Mary shared some of the challenges and made similar discoveries on her leadership path, including endorsing the value of professional networks and collegial support. Fostering a cohesive leadership team that modelled increased collaboration and enabling staff to lead aspects of change in an organic way were other important contributors to how change unfolded under her leadership.

Like other participants, Mary struggled with delegation and letting go ("I've always needed to be sure it got done"). Mary found that she was learning more about what to delegate and what to keep to herself: "I'm learning not to hold so much in my head and my heart." Mary also echoed the views of others when she advised, "Be adaptive but stay committed to your own values and beliefs."

Conclusion

"In the end, leadership can be sustainable only if it sustains leaders themselves," according to Hargreaves and Fink (2004). The principals in this study found various ways to sustain their leadership, including through strengthening their connections, through holding close to their core values and beliefs, and through recognising the need to adapt what they did and how they did it.

It seems from this study that the fundamentals of good leadership are very similar whether you are in a crisis or business as usual. However, some aspects of leadership will be more critical than ever when you face a crisis, where almost everything is in a heightened state. These aspects of leadership are what principals in this study have given prominence to.

This study's findings show that principals tended to use multiple sources of support, mainly connecting with other principals or mentors who had prior leadership experience. Their response to a growing workload was to reach out further. They sought a range of perspectives and lived experience, and networks that openly shared ideas and experiences. They then sought to use this to better locate their own leadership in this extraordinary context. As Fullan (2002) stated, "Knowledge creation and sharing fuel moral purpose."

Know who you are, what you can and can't control, know what you stand for, and then go and stand up for it, were views regularly expressed in this study. It seems that in a sea of change, principals needed to anchor their thoughts and decisions to something certain.

Leadership is a way of being. It's not a series of tasks done well. Success is fluid and incremental. It rests on the accuracy of every decision, on the quality of each conversation, on how well a leader communicates the 'why' that underpins the 'what.' The capacities to connect well with others, effectively adapt to changing conditions and be relentlessly self-aware were demanded of Christchurch's school leaders more than ever

during the years that have followed the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes.

There are significant lessons to be learned by all school leaders, and those whose role it is to support them, from the experiences of principals in Christchurch's extended post-disaster context. As Hargreaves and Fink (2004) concluded,

Sustainable leadership cannot be left to individuals, however talented or dedicated they are. If we want change to matter, and to last, then the systems in which leaders do their work must make sustainability (of leadership) a priority (p. 13).

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