“I had to put my big girl knickers on”

The experiences of two female educational leaders in New Zealand turning declining schools around

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Rationale for this research

Professional experience of leading a complex, high-need school under a statutory intervention

Working in this complex environment affected me professionally and personally; finding colleagues to trust, to unburden too, to seek support and guidance was fraught with countervailing pressures

Little research, resources or literature available that positions this work as demanding and heavily reliant on the leader’s ability to establish strong, trusting relationships

Scarce acknowledgement on how female principals approach school recovery processes and the effects this work has on their professional and personal lives
Questions to consider

- How do principals know and understand “what to do, how to do it, and [have] the courage to act” (Papa & English, 2011, p. 3) while leading their school’s recovery? What might this look like in action?

- How do principals professionally and personally navigate such challenging and complex work?

- How might school principals be supported as they seek to embed sustained change, allowing for a healthier school to emerge from the turbulence of decline and recovery?

- What are the contextual circumstances which need to be surfaced and addressed to support the psychological health and safety of principals?
New Zealand Education Context

Education Act 1989 and “Tomorrow’s Schools”

Devolved system of governance similar to a business model - trustees elected by parents; principals effectively CEO’s and manage the day-to-day running of a school

Part 7A of the Education Act 1989 legislate six different levels of intervention to address identified risks “promptly and effectively” to reduce intense interventions later on (Ministry of Education, 2015)

School support programmes were not implemented until 1994

The findings in this presentation are drawn from a larger project underway.

Today I focus on the experiences of two female principals who were involved in ‘intense intervention’ in their schools
Introducing the principals and their contexts

A declining situation

Susan and Matai School
20+ years teaching
9 years as principal
9 years in Matai School when interviewed
Matai School in second year of intervention
Sought Ministerial support

Stepping into situation

Grace and Pohutukawa School
20+ years teaching
7 years as principal
2 years at Pohutukawa School when interviewed
Pohutukawa School in second year of intervention
Appointed while school under statutory intervention
Key Findings: Professional pressures

Time, space and relationships

“... take the time – to listen, to observe, to learn, to really, really hear people’s stories – their past hurts, their dreams and current issues ... you have to be physically and mentally present and in the space. ... get to know your staff and to listen to their stories; we forget that the staff has often been through a lot - they are traumatised too. Establishing relationships takes time and they are vital. I think that probably for me, that was the key; taking the time to listen” (Grace)

Collegial trust and integrity

Susan believed a testimony of the teachers’ professionalism was that they could “hold things together in the classroom, while crying in the staffroom during breaks”

“... [office manager] are invaluable and we can’t pay them enough. Especially if they are local and you’re new. They know whose who; who’s related to whom; which families have a long-standing feud. They are able to help you understand why a parent responded in a certain way, or which business is supportive of the school or who the key players in the community, are (Grace)
**Key Findings: Professional pressures**

Local and professional support

“horrific”, “difficult year”, “threatened”, “turmoil” “frightened”, “worthless” and “hell” were used by Susan to describe the first year of Matai School’s intervention

“Who recognises that actually the job we do to is so big? … unless you’ve also taken on a school that is actually as bad as it can get, and you’ve been there, I don’t think you really can understand” (Grace)

… the thing about not having a board is there is no one else to come into school to meet the electrician, or to deal with governance stuff at the local level. I don’t have that! You’re it! You’re being and doing all! … adds to the stress when you don’t have that support right on the spot. It’s inherently wrong! But you do it for the kids, we are here for the kids (Grace)

Professional, philosophical, geographical and social isolation

“… be easier to just flag all that we’re doing and return to traditional approaches; it would be easier, but not necessary the best, the right thing for the kids” (Grace)

“Are we meant to be socially isolated because of our role and position within the community, or do you become involved with the community, but then you’re too close. It’s hard. … You’ve got to live, you’ve got to have friends and socialise, but where’s the line? I don’t know”(Susan)
Key Findings: Personal pressures

Professional persona infiltrates personal space
“I’ve given my life to the school. I’ve devoted myself to the school 24:7 and I’ve allowed it to embroil my life. I haven’t given time for me. But the ability to step back is hard!” (Susan)

Physiological and psychological health
“I made it! But at times, life was unbearable! … would’ve committed suicide. I was at the point where I thought that was the best option” (Susan)

Susan shared she had become angrier, which she contributed to continually fighting for her position and her school. However, she saw this as positive sign: “I think if I hadn’t done that, I wouldn’t have been here”

Emotional safety
“You have to be able to say, right, there is my emotional line and I can leave that [person’s story] there, the crisis is theirs, do not get emotionally involved … I’ve learn at this school how to keep emotionally out of that space and be able to listen and maintain integrity and that relationship” (Grace)

Grace saw a need for principals to professional counselling or supervision, confiding with a laugh “It’s been really good, I’ve actually been using you in that sort of role!”
The darker side of school recovery leadership

Principal’s deeply entwined with the process of the intervention and their school’s recovery

Tension of enacting leadership with an ethic of care (for self and others) while fulfilling the demands from procedural requirements

Perceived (and real) lack of agency to suggest and enact change

Isolation (professional, philosophical, geographical, and personal)
Moving forward: Professional and personal knowledge landscapes

Acknowledging and naming demands involved in turning schools around

Developing and embedding contextually appropriate support structures at multiple stages of the change leadership process

Considering the cultural context when embarking on change actions

Surfacing the tensions and celebrations of school recovery leadership

- Both principals have been professionally and personally shaped and changed from their experiences
- stronger in their beliefs about teaching and learning
- clearer visions for their leadership philosophy and practice
- more aware of their personal abilities and limitations, particularly in relation to complex, challenging situations


Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, Inc.


References


