Principal leadership practices during the COVID-19 lockdown

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Abstract

New Zealand secondary school principals were required to make changes to their leadership practices when schools were closed as part of a national lockdown in response to the COVID-19 situation in early 2020. Eighteen school principals from a range of secondary schools were interviewed about their experiences. The research found that principals engaged in leadership that was relational, distributed and collaborative. They prioritised the wellbeing of teachers and students, responded flexibly to the challenges faced, drew on expertise from both within and outside of the school, and took opportunities to refocus and try new ways of working.

Keywords: *Crisis leadership; relational leadership; distributed leadership; collaboration*

Introduction

The COVID-19 virus arrived in New Zealand in February 2020, and the subsequent lockdown aimed at reducing spread resulted in New Zealand schools closing for a period of time. This closure was unprecedented for most schools, and principals had to adapt their usual leadership approaches. This article presents the perspectives of a sample of secondary principals regarding the changes they made to their leadership practices over lockdown, the ways in which leadership was distributed and collaborations were undertaken, and the people who inspired or motivated them. It aims to contribute to our understanding of school leadership in times of crisis and highlights effective leadership approaches and implications for future practice. The literature regarding effective school leadership will be drawn on in the next section before leadership capabilities and practices in times of crisis are discussed. The study methodology, including a description of the participants and methods of data collection, will then be explained. The findings are presented next and three aspects of leadership practice discussed with reference to previous research.

Effective school leadership

A recent update of the widely cited article *Seven Strong Claims about School Leadership* (Leithwood et al., 2008) has reiterated that successful school leaders draw on four similar leadership practices. These are: setting direction, which involves building a shared vision and creating high expectations; building relationships and developing people, which involves building trusting relationships and supporting staff professional capacity; developing the organisation, which involves building a collaborative culture and distributing leadership; and improving instruction (Leithwood et al.,

2020). There are strong similarities between these practices and the capabilities in the New Zealand *Educational Leadership Capability Framework* (Education Council, 2018) which also emphasises the importance of building and sustaining high trust relationships; building and sustaining collective leadership and professional community; and embodying the organisation's values, as well as showing moral purpose, optimism, agency and resilience; and contributing to the development and wellbeing of education beyond their organisation. Building relational trust is also one of three leadership capabilities highlighted by Robinson (2019) along with using relevant knowledge to make leadership decisions and solving complex problems. Many of these leadership practices are relevant to crisis leadership as the following discussion shows.

Crisis leadership

Leadership in times of crisis has been the focus of considerable research in the business sector. Leadership behaviours that work well according to DuBrin (2013), include staying calm, making good use of team members, appreciating and recognising accomplishments, and learning from the crisis. Schoenberg (2005) has identified a range of desirable personal attributes of effective crisis leaders including integrity, passion, vision, courage and organisational skills. Kerrissey and Edmonson (2020), focusing on leadership through COVID-19, highlight four effective approaches: acting early; communicating transparently; responding productively to any mistakes; and seeking diverse opinions and constantly updating. Koehn (2020), also writing about the leadership throughout the pandemic and drawing on two decades of research on crisis leadership, recommends: acknowledging fears then encouraging resolve; giving people direction and purpose; encouraging experimenting and learning from mistakes, and modelling desirable behaviours including self-care.

A lack of research on crisis leadership specific to educational contexts has been noted (Mutch, 2015; Smith & Riley, 2012), although many of the capabilities and practices described above are likely to be relevant to school leadership. Smith and Riley emphasise key leadership attributes such as: strong interpersonal communication skills; the ability to synthesise often contradictory information sources; the capacity to empathise and to respect diverse perspectives; a capacity for optimism; flexibility; and the ability to learn from and capitalise on opportunities. Mutch, drawing on research conducted in the aftermath of the Canterbury earthquakes as well as other crises, suggests that dispositional, relational and situational factors all influence leaders' practices. Dispositional factors include personal qualities, values, skills and knowledge, while relational factors include building relationships and a sense of community, and encouraging collaboration. Adapting to the changing situation, effectively using resources, and making appropriate decisions are examples of situational factors. Mutch (2020) has recently provided useful recommendations for school leaders responding to the COVID-19 crisis including

planning for the ongoing impact of the crisis on students and their families and taking time to reflect and learn from experiences.

The leadership capabilities and approaches discussed above highlight three particular leadership practices: demonstrating emotional intelligence and building strong and trusting relationships; involving others in leadership; and learning in times of crisis. Each of these aspects will now be discussed more fully with reference to previous research. The importance of emotional intelligence competencies including self-awareness and empathy in times of crisis has been emphasised (Bhaduri, 2019), as has the value of trustworthy and calm leadership (American Psychological Association, 2020). Trust has also been identified as a key measurement of crisis leadership effectiveness and requires authenticity and honesty on behalf of the leader (Schoenberg, 2005). Trust is created when leaders lead with transparency and prioritise the wellbeing of stakeholders (Wooten et al., 2013). Trust is seen to be particularly important in crisis leadership as decisions are more likely to be accepted when those involved in the organisation have trust and confidence in the leader's direction (Thornton, 2021).

The importance of leadership at all levels of an organisation rather than from just the positional leader has been emphasised by Schoenberg (2005), who also highlights the importance of leaders' flexibility in being able to adopt different leadership approaches as appropriate. A benefit of leadership being distributed is that different points of view are considered, an important aspect of crisis leadership according to Powley and Taylor (2014). Similarly Wooten et al. emphasise the importance of drawing on diverse perspectives in order to learn in times of crisis. In the school context, the wide range of leadership tasks that need addressing call for a collaborative approach with principals involving their leadership teams (Mutch, 2020). Smith and Riley (2012, p. 66) emphasise the importance of leadership being "distributed and coordinated" in order that appropriate strengths and skills are drawn on.

The importance of learning from crisis situations has been emphasised in a range of literature. Wooten and James (2008) suggest that "crisis leadership demands an integration of skills, abilities and traits that allow a leaders to plan for, respond to, and learn from crisis events" (p. 353). These authors suggest that effective crisis leadership pays attention to learning and reflection and that a crisis can be a catalyst that encourages learning and that can produce innovation and enhance the organisation's capabilities. Learning and enhancing resilience is one of ten crisis management tasks derived from a range of literature by Boin et al. (2013). Wang (2008) suggests that crises "present considerable opportunities for learning" (p. 431) and should be incorporated into each stage of crises. He also discusses the paradoxical nature of crises as providing both challenges and opportunities and suggests that organisations can benefit from crises if they learn from them effectively. Boin et al. (2010) promote the value of crises providing opportunities for reform which may include changing policy direction. These authors also highlight the potential for learning and enhanced resilience.

Table 1. Principal characteristics and school types

Pseudonym	Principal gender	School location	School type	School decile	School size
Amaia	Female	Provincial city	Single sex	7	Medium (600 - 1600 students)
Ben	Male	Provincial town	Coeducational	8	Medium
Chris	Male	Provincial city	Coeducational	2	Small (> 600 students)
Dylan	Male	Large city	Coeducational	3	Medium
Emma	Female	Large city	Single sex	10	Small
Felix	Male	Provincial city	Coeducational	4	Medium
George	Male	Provincial city	Coeducational	8	Medium
Henry	Male	Large city	Single sex	9	Large (< 1600 students)
Isla	Female	Large city	Coeducational	3	Small
James	Male	Large city	Coeducational	6	Small
Kara	Female	Large city	Coeducational	7	Medium
Liam	Male	Large city	Coeducational	7	Large
Mereana	Female	Provincial town	Coeducational	6	Small
Nathan	Male	Large city	Coeducational	1	Large
Oliver	Male	Large city	Single sex	10	Medium
Pania	Female	Large city	Coeducational	1	Small
Rawiri	Male	Provincial town	Coeducational	7	Medium
Sam	Male	Large city	Coeducational	3	Medium

Note: A school's decile measures the extent to which the school's students come from low socio-economic communities. Decile 1 schools have the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities and decile 10 schools the lowest proportion.

Study methodology

I became interested in the leadership of New Zealand secondary school principals during the COVID-19 lockdown when students in the Master's of Secondary School Leadership (MSSL) programme I was teaching reflected in their reflective journal entries and blogs on changes in principal practices at their schools. The study participants were chosen using convenience or opportunity sampling (Boudah, 2010), as all had a connection with the MSSL programme either through their hosting of students on their shadowing placement, as a principal of a current student, or as a graduate of the programme. Eighteen principals from a database of over 50 secondary school principals who covered a range of school types and sizes were initially approached and 13 agreed to participate. Another eight were then approached including more female principals and principals of single sex schools to help ensure a sample population that was reasonably representative of New Zealand's approximate 370 secondary school principals in terms of school location, type, size and principal gender. The characteristics of the participants and their schools are summarised in Table 1.

Interviews of the 18 participating secondary school principals took place via Zoom between late-June and mid-July 2020 and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The interview questions focused on the leadership challenges faced by principals, their ways of communicating and keeping connected, the opportunities provided by lockdown, the distribution of leadership, people who inspired or motivated them and potential changes in their leadership practices. All interviews were transcribed and those principals who requested a copy of their transcript on their consent form were sent this for member checking. The principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) were used in the data analysis process which involved sustained immersion in the data and thoughtful reflection on possible themes.

Findings

All participants reported shifts in their leadership practices as a result of lockdown including having to lead in different ways, finding a balance between rapid and consensus decision-making, and strengthening the distribution of leadership. The leadership opportunities they took from the experience, the ways they interacted with principal colleagues, and the people they took inspiration from will now be shared.

Changes to leadership practices

A number of principals talked about the challenges they faced to leading in their usual way during lockdown, and the ways in which they had to adapt. Several reported that they felt uncomfortable about not being able to have direct contact with their staff and students:

> *I guess for me as a principal, it's really interesting because for the first time you feel*
> *really redundant, and you think, wow, you know what, without people around you and*

without the kids and without the staff, like what's the point of anything. There's no point, because your whole job is, you know, being there for people 24/7. And then suddenly, everyone's in their little bubble and reliant on a different kind of leadership.   (Isla)

I was personally a bit nervous about the leadership thing because it was novel and here at school I get a lot of energy from the people around me. If there's something I need to talk to someone about, I will see them walking past or go into their classroom or whatever. And, yes, so leadership by walking around, and I knew I wouldn't be able to do that so I was, I was slightly concerned about how I would stay connected to people.   (Kara)

How do I lead from a distance you know if I'm not in front of staff every day for two or three days a week for staff briefings ... and how I make sure I'm still doing my fair share when teachers are working every day.   (Felix)

All of these principals were actively engaged with their staff during lockdown using digital means as were the other principals. Communication was far more frequent than in pre-COVID times and tools used for regular staff briefings and senior leadership team meetings included Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet. Social as well as professional connections were maintained, for example Isla introduced WhatsApp for all staff and this provided a relaxed and humorous way of connecting. Many principals, often with the aid of student leaders used video messages to connect with staff and students. Another participant, who mentioned that he was a relatively new principal, also found he had to use different approaches and deviate from his usual consultative way of leading:

I just don't think I'd had cause to work so directively. It wasn't an unnatural thing to do, it was just the circumstances meant I had to function differently than I normally would.   (Ben)

This different way of leading increased Ben's visibility within his community and he reported:

Personally I felt like it was a real stepping into my role as a principal and a leader in the community, and the community really responded positively to my level of communication.   (Ben)

Rawiri, another relatively new principal, also felt lockdown provided an opportunity for him to gain confidence in his role:

I mean it's been two years of me just getting on and doing it and actually now for the first time I feel like the principal.   (Rawiri)

One principal who had an issue with a senior leadership team member had to deal differently with this from a distance:

It was quite useful because at one point he asked me a question and that made me reflect on it and I thought Okay, well, I'll write him an email, and then we'll talk it through. And that was the right thing to do for him and the style that he likes to be led, but it was different than if you'd been in person.   (Merena)

Study participants frequently expressed how concerned they had been for the wellbeing of their staff and students and reported the ways they had acted that were conducive to building trust. Empathy was demonstrated in a variety of ways, from the messages they sent to their school communities to how they set expectations regarding online teaching and learning learning. Comments included:

It was always wellbeing first. No matter what, everything doesn't matter, just we have to look after each other, and look after the kids, and that was a key message.   (Isla)

Our messages were always empathy first.   (Oliver)

The principals reported that they had realistic expectations of the learning that would occur and how much work staff, particularly those with dependents, could manage during lockdown.

Distributing leadership

The majority of principals were able to articulate how senior leadership team members and other staff had demonstrated leadership over lockdown. For some this was a continuation of long standing approach to distributing leadership:

I've tried to be very, very sort of focused on a distributed leadership model. I've understood for a long time, I don't have all the answers. I understand that I've got some tremendously talented people out there. And one of my jobs as a leader is to give them their heads, I suppose. And so, it's a matter of identifying where the strengths are and evolving them, and we're got a great senior management team, a diverse range of skills, everybody pitched in.   (George)

For two principals in particular, lockdown provided a strong confirmation of the value of this approach:

Yeah, just affirms that that is the way to go and it prepared us for a crisis in the best possible way. And certainly, it's something we strategically will be continuing to build on right through the school... It's an old cliché, I just can't do all of the work. I can't know what everyone's doing in the school. But I know I've got really good people I can trust.   (Liam)

I think the whole process has been an affirmation that distributed leadership is the right way to go. And I think I've got challenges around, you know, how do you play that position, around not getting in the way but using your experience sometimes to

> *slow things down or speed things up and I think you know for me that's always going*
> *to be a learning journey.*   (Nathan)

Nathan also used the opportunity to think about how to introduce more cultural diversity in leadership practices:

> *Moving forward, we needed to create leadership groups across the school and groups,*
> *not individuals, so there was a sustainability about what we were doing so we could*
> *continue to build. And then also that we could give voice to challenge the traditional*
> *hierarchies and give voice to the many leaders that were out there in terms of our*
> *staff and our students.*   (Nathan)

He described how Pasifika staff had been given voice and had stepped forward and taken their leadership practice to a new level.

Two principals commented on their delight at the way staff stepped up in their leadership practice:

> *So distributed leadership was really positive actually and there was a high trust*
> *model which going into lockdown I was not expecting. People stood up.*   (Rawiri)

> *They delivered right through the organization. I was just amazed and I'm just very*
> *sort of quite humbled by it really and it was an endorsement to our leadership team*
> *that what we were trying to do and we've been quite deliberate about it in lots of ways*
> *and it was a bit painful at times, but we had high capacity within the organisation*
> *and they could work independently because that's how we operate here anyway.*
>   (Liam)

For others, lockdown had demonstrated the value of a more distributed approach and had provided opportunities for different staff members to use their strengths. Examples of this included staff proficient in digital technologies sharing ideas and supporting other staff.

Personal lessons learned

While there were many commonalities in the responses to most of the interview questions, there was more variation in the personal lessons learned by principals in this study. Some related to the need for flexibility in the approaches taken, according the context:

> *It's okay to take on those different ways of functioning as a leader. You know quite*
> *strong delegation, quite strong directive leadership with effective communication*
> *being a real key, and coupling, and consulting where you can when you got this*
> *time and space to do that as well. I suppose just making sure as a leader that you*
> *recognize those different ways of operating and use them effectively when they need*
> *to be applied.*   (Ben)

Ongoing support for distributed leadership was a focus for some principals who saw their role as encouraging leadership in others:

> *I think probably holding on to that idea of encouraging as much as possible the distribution of leadership. I mean collaboration was one of the things that came out during lock down but there are lots of other ways in which that kind of distribution of leadership could happen, and encouraging people that that's something that's really valuable.*   (Amaia)

Nathan who worked to introduce more cultural diversity in the leadership of the school, wished to continue this going forward:

> *I think that growing our leadership from within our community is really important in that next phase, and the next leader of the school, and when I say leader, it could be leaders, you know it could be a collaborative way forward, are from the community.*   (Nathan)

Oliver commented on the importance of building culture and coaching suggesting:

> *The less work I do, the better.*   (Oliver)

He had also reflected on the importance of patience and being able to deal with ambiguity.

The importance of responsiveness was commented on by Chris who wanted to provide more opportunities for:

> *Individuals to do their own thing. You know, they don't have to fit within the constraints of a system that is set up you know, based on a colonial system, anyway.*   (Chris)

Three principals commented that they intended to show their appreciation of the work done by staff more overtly:

> *Something that I'll take from it, just to be reminded of how important it is to take care of the people who take care of our boys.*   (Henry)

> *I'm probably a little bit more mindful of staff wellbeing than I was ... I guess as principal, I need to show that I care.*   (Felix)

> *Thinking more about my team more consciously, my very immediate team ... the importance of taking time with the relationships rather than getting on with the work.*   (Pania)

A stronger focus on vision and strategy going forward were commented on by James and Rawiri with Rawiri commenting that lockdown had provided more time to focus on strategy:

> *It's now being able to take that elevated approach to focusing now on strategy rather than, direction of the school moving forward rather than the operational side*

> *...I know now that I've got the team around me too, to take that load off me so I can*
> *actually move the school forward.*   (Rawiri)

Other diverse responses included: leading the effective use of learning data (Dylan); accelerating the power shift between teachers and students that occurred over lockdown (Mereana); increasing the frequency and the diversity of communication with parents and students (Sam); focusing on succession planning (Liam); being more relaxed and laughing at herself (Isla); and gaining a better understanding of student perspectives (Kara). Emma did not feel her leadership practice had changed but shared that it had been reaffirmed:

> *What it did do was heighten my awareness and understanding of the things that really*
> *matter when also leading face to face; connectedness, a sense of community, listening*
> *to stakeholders' voice, being agile, responsive, adaptable, appreciating that most*
> *teachers want to do the best they can for their students. In that respect the lockdown*
> *really brought out the best in my leadership practice.*   (Emma)

Inspiration and motivation

There was a variety of responses to the question about who inspired or motivated participants over lockdown ranging from political figures to school staff and students. Nine of the 18 principals mentioned the Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, whom they thought role modelled effective leadership. Comments included:

> *Just the staying calm, the staying positive, keeping the communications regular,*
> *keeping the messages really consistent, learned a lot from that.*   (Pania)

> *Highly skilled winning of hearts and minds, which is her forte. And that has*
> *to come first, I mean anything you try to do in a school, any initiative, you've*
> *got to convince of the moral imperative otherwise, you know, we actually are a*
> *free country and like a school that's exactly the same ... I found that very, very*
> *inspirational.*   (Liam)

Kara found Jacinda Ardern's leadership inspirational and staff at her school expressed their gratitude for how Kara had taken this on board and had kept them feeling safe and supported. They told her:

> *We feel really lucky, Jacinda did a great job with the country, and you did a great job*
> *with the school, you know that we felt in really safe hands in the country and with*
> *you.*   (Kara)

The leadership of Ashley Bloomfield was also mentioned by four principals. Emma commented:

> *I actually think Jacinda and Ashley Bloomfield were quite phenomenal quite frankly*
> *and I think that they took that very calm measured approach as well which is how I do*

> *like to approach those kind of things ... I think they modelled that extremely well from a*
> *leadership perspective.*   (Emma)

The leadership shown by the Minister of Education and the Secretary for Education was also favourably commented on by some participants including Oliver who had shared some of Iona Holstead's emails with colleagues overseas and commented that New Zealanders could trust the messages they received from those in authority unlike some other countries. Many participants were motivated by the level of commitment shown by their senior leadership or management teams and by teachers, for example:

> *My senior management team, I'm just so lucky that I've got such a committed and*
> *unified group of people.*   (George)

> *Seeing them work so hard and hearing what they're doing with the kids ... so they*
> *absolutely motivate me on every given day to do what I do and do the best I can do to*
> *support them.*   (Isla)

Other role models included principal mentors, particularly for less experienced principals, and family. Rawiri commented on the guidance he had received from his Springboard Trust coach:

> *So, I've got a coach ... so she was pretty inspirational to me and gave me a lot of focus*
> *around actually how are we going to construct our way and move forward.*   (Rawiri)

Collaborations and networks

Networking with colleagues both before and during lockdown was seen to be valuable for the vast majority of participants in this study. These networks varied from formal networks connected to the Secondary Principals' Association and Post-Primary Teachers' Association to more informal local networks. The benefits of networking included hearing a range of perspectives, being able to trouble shoot and problem solve, as well as sharing policies and ideas.

> *It was just really helpful to hear what other people were doing and you didn't feel*
> *like you're on your own and having to work it all out for yourself. That made a big*
> *difference definitely.*   (Henry)

> *We were touching base regularly just to gauge the feel in the community and it was very,*
> *very useful. So also probably just supporting each other with how are you going and*
> *what's happening.*   (Liam)

Amaia particularly valued the local principals' network she belonged to which was active both before and during lockdown:

> *We know one another well, we work a lot together and we all discussed how we were*
> *handling and managing it, and you pick up other ideas from other people. That that*
> *was a really important connection.*   (Amaia)

Kahui Ako networks were mentioned by six participants. These collaborations had the benefit of ensuring that consistent messages were passed on to the community. Dylan described this approach as doing things in unison and Isla similarly suggested:

> *The community got good solid messages from all of us so I think they kept things really*
> *calm and steady as well which was nice.*   (Isla)

Several participants also participated in networks organised by the Springboard Trust which they found useful and/or worked with coaches assigned to them as part of their participation in a Springboard programme. James appreciated this network for sharing ideas with other principals and the encouragement if provided for him to reflect on what was happening during lockdown, while Rawiri discussed how his coach challenged him about the welfare of the students and what the school was doing to support their needs.

Discussion

There were both similarities and differences in the ways in which the leadership practices of principals shifted during and as a result of lockdown. The similarities will be discussed first and relate to three aspects: relational leadership; distributed leadership; and networking and collaboration. The differences will then be considered, in particular the ways in which the principals learned from the crisis, and suggestions made for ways in which principals can reflect on their learning.

Relational leadership

The leadership practised by principals during the COVID-19 lockdown was to a large extent relational in nature. Relational leadership has been defined as a dynamic process of social influence through which change occurs (Uhl-Bien, 2006) and changes in practice occured iteratively throughout lockdown as principals worked collaboratively to address the challenges schools faced. Clarke (2018) highlights the importance of trust, respect and mutuality in relational leadership and these capabilities were displayed by the study participants. While at times a directive leadership approach was necessary, for the most part principals focused on relationships, demonstrating empathy for the circumstances faced by their staff and students, prioritising wellbeing, and showing appreciation for the work done by their colleagues. The prioritisation of wellbeing is also noted in a recent Education Review Office report (Education Review Office, 2020) with around 70% of school leaders reporting that "they had explicitly prioritised learner wellbeing over academic learning during lockdown" (p. 3). There is congruence between the ways in which the participants practised relational leadership and the expectation in the Leadership Capability Framework that trusting relationships are be built and sustained by respectfully engaging and demonstrating empathy (Education Council, 2018). Trusting relationships are also highlighted as a successful school leadership practice by Leithwood et al. (2020), alongside the provision of support and consideration for individuals. Trust is also seen as important in crisis leadership, with integrity,

authenticity, honesty and integrity being important leadership characteristics (Schoenberg, 2005; Wooten & James, 2008). Teo et al. (2017) suggest that mutual trust within organisations is likely to support rapid adaptations in crisis situations. Relational factors emphasised by Mutch (2015) that were evident in this study include strengthening relationships, fostering collaboration and demonstrating empathy and warmth. The findings of this study emphasise that leadership is enacted through relationships (Clarke, 2018) and principals may wish to consider how they ensure strong trusting relationships exist in their schools as these will support agile and collaborative responses in times of crisis.

Distributed leadership

While many of the principals in this study already had a focus on distributed leadership within their schools, its value became even more apparent during lockdown due to the range of issues that required attention. Many participants provided examples of how their colleagues stepped up, whether they were senior leadership team members, heads of departments, IT specialists, classroom teachers or pastoral team members. They were extremely grateful for the willingness of their colleagues to take on responsibilities and work collaboratively for the benefit of students and their families. While principals sometimes had to make some quick decisions without the opportunity to consult widely, all preferred to involve others when possible. This distribution of leadership fits with the leadership capability of "Building and sustaining collective leadership and professional community" (Education Council, 2018) and with the claim from Leithwood et al. (2020) that successful school leaders develop their organisations, a strategy involving building a collaborative culture and distributing leadership. Making good use of teams in times of crisis has been recommended by DuBrin (2013, p. 17) who suggests teams should be built "inside, across and outside the organization". This strategy fits with Leithwood et al.'s suggestion of "the establishment of new teams, grouping and connections for specific purposes" (p. 9). Probert and Turnbull James (2011) advocate for using crises to rethink leadership concepts within organisations, suggesting that a focus on leadership practice rather than leadership roles will help address challenges facing organisations. This study has highlighted the value of distributed leadership in schools particularly in times of crisis and principals are encouraged to consider how they provide opportunities for leadership based on expertise rather than position as suggested by Leithwood et al..

Networking and collaboration

Networking and collaborating with principal colleagues was a feature of principal leadership practice revealed in this study. All participants mentioned networks that provided support during lockdown including formal and informal secondary principal networks at both local and national levels and in some cases interactions with Kahui Ako colleagues. Principals appreciated having opportunities to share ideas and resources such as role descriptions and policies and to provide

consistent messages to their local communities. Collaborative leadership practices including active involvement in networks are emphasised in the Education Council's leadership capability of "Contributing to the development and wellbeing of education beyond their organisation" (Education Council, 2018). Leithwood et al. (2020) also emphasise the value of making connections and facilitating collaboration. The networks referred to in this study could be likened to DuBrin's (2013) concept of outside teams which have the potential to offer different perspectives in times of crisis. The value of networks for making sense and meaning of crisis situations has also been emphasised by Teo et al. (2017) who advocate for "the development of relational networks that allow the organization to adapt and restore function" (p. 136). The importance of looking outside of one's organisation and drawing on diverse sources of expertise has been emphasised (Kerrissey & Edmonson, 2020) and this was illustrated by the influence of national figures such as Jacinda Ardern and Ashley Bloomfield on participants' practices. Principals also relied on the frequent messaging from the Ministry of Education to support their decision making. Most found this very useful and passed on the key messages to staff and the wider community where relevant. Additionally, Schoenberg (2005) emphasises the value of having an external person who can act as a sounding board. Several of the principals had coaches provided by the Springboard Trust who offered different perspectives which were highly valued. This research supports the importance of principals engaging in collaborative networks in order to gain different perspectives and to share ideas and resources.

Differences in leadership practices

The differences in reported changes to leadership practices and the lesson learned by principals in this study relate to the individual circumstances and contexts in which the principals operate. Two less experienced principals reported that the crisis had provided them with opportunities to be more visible and step up into principalship whereas some of the more experienced principals found themselves drawing more on the expertise of their colleagues. All participants were able to demonstrate that they had learned from leading through the crisis and outlined ways in which they had or intended to lead differently reflecting the influence of context on leadership effectiveness (Clarke, 2018). Some of these changes in leadership practice had quite significant implications for their schools such as changes in strategic direction, while others were more personal such as showing more appreciation for staff efforts. These findings reflect the situational aspects of crisis leadership suggested by Mutch (2015) including adaptability, flexibility and demonstrating an understanding of context. The principal responses also reflect the findings on earlier studies that crises provide an opportunity to learn from and capitalise on opportunities (Koehn, 2020; Smith & Riley, 2012).

Conclusion

While it has been suggested that the school leadership practice in times of crisis differs from that which is needed in usual times (Smith & Riley, 2012), this research suggests that it may be just the emphasis that needs to change. Two of the practices of successful school leadership highlighted by Leithwood et al. (2020), building relationships and developing people through providing support and consideration and prioritising trusting relationships, and developing the organisation through distributing leadership and working collaboratively, were evident in the leadership practices described by principals in this study. There was a strong focus on synergetic practices and wellbeing was prioritised. Principals and other school leaders may find the *Leadership Capability Framework* (Education Council, 2018), referred to throughout this article, and previously identified as a potentially useful tool for reflecting on crisis leadership (Thornton, 2020) helpful. Use of such frameworks for reflection encourages learning from crises through refocusing and has the potential to enhance organisational capability. While this is a small scale study and not necessarily representative of the leadership practices of all New Zealand secondary school principals, it reflects the findings of other research highlighting effective leadership practices in time of crisis. Leadership that is relational, distributed and collaborative is likely to create a culture where the wellbeing of teachers and students is prioritised, leadership responses are flexible and draw on expertise both within and outside of the school, and opportunities are taken to refocus and try new ways of working.

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