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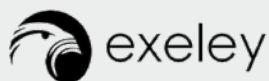
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# An evolution in distributed educational leadership: From sole leader to co-principalship

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## **Abstract**

*This paper traverses changes in perceptions of the school principal's role, from sole to distributed leadership practices. A brief commentary on selected New Zealand literature is followed by a case study of a secondary co-principalship that identifies adaptive strategies and success factors in this joint role. The potentiality of the national Leadership Strategy (2018) and Educational Leadership Capability Framework (2018) to impact these distributed features will then be explored. The paper concludes with suggestions for future directions for distributed leadership practice in New Zealand.*

**Keywords:** *Educational leadership; distributed leadership practice; co-principalship; New Zealand Educational Leadership Capability Framework*

## **Introduction**

When a regional group of New Zealand secondary principals at a 2019 conference was asked for their suggested metaphors to reflect their present role perceptions, they referenced functional terms such as “alchemist”, “chess player”, “tight rope walker”, “magician”, and “relationologist”, all of which reflect the omnipresent complexity of the school leader’s job.

Such complex demands have necessitated a shift in how school leaders manage their work, and a movement away from a single person responsibility to a concept of distributed leadership. This concept is thoughtfully summarised by Harris (2005) as a process by which “a larger number of people are involved in the work of others, are trusted with information, are involved in decision making, are exposed to new ideas and are participating in knowledge creation and transfer” (p. 165). More broadly, there has been ample conceptual thinking and research applied world-wide to the topic of distributed leadership responsibilities in educational institutions (e.g. Leithwood and Day, 2007; Spillane, Camburn & Pareja, 2007; Gronn, 2008; Harris, 2013; Youngs, 2017).

This paper begins with a brief commentary on selected literature in New Zealand on distributed leadership in schools. A case study of a secondary co-principalship is explored to demonstrate an ultimate educational experience of shared leadership, followed by a discussion of potential future directions that might impact distributed leadership capability in New Zealand.

### **Selected New Zealand literature**

In a collection of 10 case studies as part of the International Successful School Principalship Project, Notman (2011) identified distributed leadership as one of a number of successful leadership strategies, whereby leaders built individual capability among their staff through distributed leadership roles and thoughtful succession planning. This distribution also included clusters of teams formed for specific purposes e.g. managerial oversight, programme review and futures planning. However, these successful principals also confronted challenges in their distributed process, since the concept assumes that “teachers will have the capability and skills, motivation and time to take up leadership responsibility. Small school or centre size, high staff turnover or the absence of experienced teachers may work against effective leadership distribution” (Notman, 2011, p. 140).

Following on from this research, Youngs (2014) conducted case studies of two New Zealand secondary schools and postulated that distributed forms of leadership practice combined as hybrid configurations of organisational and emergent leadership practice. The study found that distributed leadership was contextually dependent and included socio-cultural elements. Youngs concluded: “No grand narrative of distributed leadership was evident. Rather there were in its place, fluid hybrid configurations of leadership practice across two or more people, where authority co-existed with human and social capital” (p. 102).

Distributed leadership practice in New Zealand is not limited to the school sector. For example, Denee and Thornton (2017) conducted a nationwide survey about distributed leadership of early childhood teachers and positional leaders, leading to the development of a framework for effective leadership practice including mentoring and coaching; fostering relational trust; and creating vision and designing supportive structures. In like vein, Youngs (2017) critically explored collaborative and distributed leadership in a review of the literature pertaining to higher education. This review included New Zealand studies as well as Australia, Europe and the USA. It suggested that moving beyond distributed leadership to the notion of leadership-as-practice “may offer an alternative to seemingly always getting stuck in the dualistic notions of collegiality and managerialism” (p. 150).

The concept of leadership-as-practice leads on to the following qualitative case study of two educational leaders who chose to share their leadership focus in the form of a secondary school co-principalship.

### **Case study of a co-principalship**

#### ***Background***

The major form of a co-principalship model centres on an educational context where two individual leaders work full-time as principals, and where differentiated roles are shared with equal authority.

In this respect, Gronn and Hamilton (2004) have argued that “co-principalship is a form of shared space inhabited by a distributed mind” (p. 3). Strengths of the model have commonly been identified as shared decision-making and workload, reduction in stress levels, and the opportunity for individuals to grow in areas of interest.

Conversely, the model’s weaknesses have typically been around developing trust and the risk of being played off against each other by parents, community constituents and teachers (Eckman, 2006). There is also the issue of personal compatibility and developing a shared philosophy of the teaching and learning process. Accordingly, it is of little surprise that research findings in the field of co-principalship are variable in terms of the model’s relative success: some schools with a shared principalship have prospered while others have struggled, particularly when the model was imposed on a school site (Grubb & Flessa, 2006).

During the period 2018–2019, a case study of a co-principalship in a secondary school in the southern region of New Zealand explored the nature of adaptation to a new leadership role by the respective female and male principals. This research was undertaken as part of a 30-country investigation entitled the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP). The international project’s overall aim is to focus research attention on identifying key values, attributes and strategies that enable school leaders to achieve and maintain success.

### *Conceptual framework*

The conceptual framework for this study focused on adaptive leadership concepts proposed by Heifetz (1994). He saw advantages in viewing leadership in terms of adaptive practice which included problem solving in situ and, for example, an opportunity to evaluate leadership strategies during a change process (cited in Notman, 2017). Of interest in this study was the use made of adaptive leadership as the co-principals sought to diagnose their adaptive strategies, and whether their professional identities were impacted by the change.

### *Methodology*

The case study design featured purposive sampling of a major school leadership change (a move to a co-principalship), qualitative methods of data collection in a natural setting, and inductive data analysis. Qualitative data was obtained from the two principals, senior leader, and significant others (e.g. Board of Trustees) through a series of semi-structured interviews to illuminate features such as adaptive leadership, identity and success factors.

Case study data was analysed through inductive analysis, firstly subjected to open and axial coding processes that conceptualised and categorised data, while selective coding later explored relationships and patterns across categories. These were subsequently written up in the narrative form of rich descriptions. These methods replicated ISSPP protocols laid down for such qualitative studies. On account of the single sample size of this study, there can be no claim made that research findings could be generalised to other school co-principals or to other change contexts.

### *Case study context*

“Holmdale College” is an urban year 9–13 New Zealand secondary school. It is co-educational with a school roll of 700 students whose ages range between 13 and 18. There are diverse ethnicities that include European, Māori, Pasifika, and Asian students. The school has approximately 50 teaching staff and offers wide-ranging learning programmes in academic, creative, sporting, leadership and service pursuits.

“Barbara” is one of the co-principals who began her joint role in 2018, having worked at the school for 25 years. Her family believed in the transformative power of education. Her love of literature, learning and working with teenagers were important precursors to her choice of teaching as a career. She did not see herself as a Head of Department initially but later found the role to be distinctly rewarding. Barbara held a number of senior leadership roles at Holmdale before becoming an Assistant Principal. Her key leadership approaches have been to serve others, be collaborative and consultative, and follow a principle-centred style of leadership that is focused on personal and professional values. Respondents referred to her being approachable, articulate, committed to the school culture, and having a strong ethic of care with the students’ and staff’s best interests at heart.

“William” was raised in rural areas and came from a family of teachers. He has a strong sporting background that cemented the concepts of teamwork and shared leadership that would stay with him throughout his teaching career. Like Barbara, William held Head of Department positions at different schools prior to being an Assistant and Deputy Principal at Holmdale where he has taught for the past 15 years. He sees himself with particular strengths in decision making and in leading others. His leadership approach is based around distributed leadership practice, using skills of people suited for particular tasks, whether they be teachers, ground staff, site manager or office manager. For William, his leadership approach is dictated by context and “what’s the right thing to do” in each circumstance. Respondents acknowledged his pragmatism, approachability, student-centredness, business skills and high level of investment in the school.

Neither Barbara nor William wanted to be a sole principal. Their decision to apply jointly for the vacant principal position was founded, firstly, on a shared desire for a work-life balance. Second, they had worked together for 10 years at Holmdale and recognised their complementary professional and personal strengths as educational leaders. When William became Acting Principal during the previous Principal’s sabbatical leave for a term, it gave them both the opportunity to model co-leadership for the staff, with overwhelmingly positive feedback. The shared leadership model took hold. As William commented about the then forthcoming principal vacancy:

*So whether there was a principal or whether we were the principals, the notion was that we wanted to share the leadership that we had. If that was as two DPs or two APs, then we would share that. We felt quite comfortable with that because it was*

*about consensus, about collaboration, about joining forces, having two brains rather than one, having two different starting points rather than one.*

## Summary of findings

### *Adaptive leadership*

After two years in their new context of a co-principalship, Barbara and William reflected back on their transition from Assistant and Deputy Principal respectively to being co-principals, a “two for one deal” as William called it. The theme of contextually responsive leadership was ever present in their reflections. For William, it was not a case of working within a fixed job description – “I’m not quite sure what my job description is on any one day of the week” – but rather about understanding and examining different situations as they present themselves. This adaptive capacity was reinforced by one of the school’s senior management team when he described William as “a very, very skilful leader in the sense that he has a number of different faces that he can wear in any given situation, and he’s very fluid”.

The two co-principals had to adapt their *modus operandi* in working together, particularly in understanding each other at decision-making time, and understanding their individual thought processes; hence the need for heightened communication between the two:

*Sometimes, you know, we’ve had to adapt. I know I have. I’ve had to pull my head in a little bit at times and think, oh hell, you can’t just go and say what you’ve just thought because you haven’t talked about that. That’s why you’re both seeking an opinion and feedback [from the other principal]. Before you open your mouth, you should actually consult about... is this the right way to do it or the right time to do it? (William)*

This feedback loop was not solely inter-principal. It also importantly involved consultation with wise heads within the school, including the two Assistant Principals who complete the senior management team. This broad-based consultation was important to Barbara “because otherwise, you just get in your own echo chamber and everyone just keeps reinforcing your world view that could be limited”. Seeking external advice and support outside of the school was vital for both principals. From Barbara’s perspective, these avenues included trusted mentors, reading educational research findings, and investigating inspirational schools that are producing innovative or exemplary pedagogical or leadership practices.

One of the early adaptations for themselves, and rationale behind establishing a shared principalship, was the opportunity afforded to enhance their work-life balance, and not feel guilty about it. The prospect of preserving one’s life outside of school did not come easy to both principals at first. Barbara commented:

*It takes courage to walk out of the office earlier than 6pm, to say “Actually, that’s enough for today and I’m going to walk out now”. And there is courage in saying “No, I can’t get to that music recital tonight or that sports practice or game tonight” because I’m at capacity, I actually need some down time. I’m peopled out and I actually need to replenish myself. And I’m not going to look at my emails on a Saturday. The world’s not going to end if I don’t get to those until Sunday.*

Another adaptive feature of the co-principals was the acknowledgement of sharing leadership strategies, when leading from the front with authority, leading from the middle alongside people or leading from the rear where the principal’s impact is purely supportive and, at times, unseen. For example, William and Barbara saw themselves as being direct, explicit and authoritative in their expectations of staff report writing on student achievement, while their support for student-led school assemblies was viewed as leadership-from-behind. A lot of their motivation of staff came down to the co-principals’ interpersonal relationships, especially in effecting change within the school. In this regard, Barbara was accustomed to asking herself key questions prior to seeking William’s input:

*What are the triggers or levers for this teacher? Do they respond better to praise or competition or black and white? Or how do I get the best out of this staff member? That’s where it’s really fabulous having co-principals because you’ve got someone else to bounce ideas off.*

### ***Interdependence***

Barbara and William are two different people in a number of ways: “An English teacher who loves words to an Accounting teacher who’s not really into words... a vegetarian versus someone who goes and eats everything... And she doesn’t know anything about sport and I don’t know much about meditation!” (William).

Yet there were definite synergies between them that become apparent. First, their knowledge of shared values about education and leadership after previously working together as part of the senior leadership team for 10 years. This came about through observing each other in their treatment of parents, staff and students; how each reacts in a crisis; how they celebrate success; how they deal with a disaster: “We didn’t need to talk about what we believed in, we knew what the other believed in”. Their professional values did not change during their co-principalship. It was more a case of how they worked out their values in their job and reflected on them. Both principals held honesty and integrity to be at the core of their values systems, with a humanistic aim of growing good people, both students and staff.

Second, their openness to moderating each other’s leadership thinking and behaviours, particularly in areas where one may lack experience and/or understanding. William offered an example:

*I can sometimes be a bit tangential in my thinking and go off into what I think is the right idea or right answer or right direction. Then Barbara will moderate my thinking by expressing her view... Yeah, probably gone too far in my thinking there, need to pull that back. Or... I'll be keen to rush off and do something and she'll say "Actually, let's make sure we get everybody on board before we rush off in a direction and alienate people".*

Barbara viewed William as more black and white in his world view as opposed to her more liberal perspectives and interpretations. She says that he has taught her "to take time for conversations. Sometimes I'm too compassionate about students, whereas William will say "No, put them back in line".

Third, they both believed strongly in shared decision making, working together collaboratively but in a timely manner. They saw advantage in a targeted approach that moves beyond lengthy consultation and potential for inertia in the decision-making process:

*We don't believe that we have to go through a long process to come up with a good idea. A good idea is a good idea. It's just being able to harness it. If you're on your own, I think that would slow you down to a point of worry. Whereas our worry is "Well, you OK? I'm OK. OK, let's go do it". (William)*

### ***Professional identity***

One of the questions of this research study was to determine if there had been any change in each principal's professional identity; for example, did the enactment of the joint role subsume their identity as an individual leader? Both leaders firmly indicated that they had no need for the label or specific identity of co-principal – "it's just do the job and earn the respect of the people around you".

When asked if she had changed in any way since becoming a co-principal, Barbara responded that she did not feel any differently in the role, and that her authenticity was still intact:

*So when I retire, I'm not going to have a crisis of identity, like my whole personality is not defined by the role that I'm playing at the moment. So no, I don't feel a different person when I'm leading from the front or I'm making some of those hard calls.*

However, what did change for Barbara was her increased confidence in undertaking honest conversations, having to make those "hard calls" with staff and parents in particular.

Both principals were adamant that they would not lose their teacher identity in their new roles. They were keen to preserve their classroom teaching credibility "because you don't lose contact with the reality of the daily routines and the expectations that go on teachers" (William) and "as leaders of education, teaching and learning is our core business". (Barbara)



The principal picture that emerged here is a sought after balance between acceptance of a collaborative co-principal identity while maintaining their individual identities as teachers and as people. A senior management team member summarised their leadership partnership in this way:

*The idea of a co-principalship is not going to work, even if you've got two great people but they don't work as a team. As a combination, it's great – they challenge each other, they interrogate each other, they respect each other, they complement each other. They have a level of humility, in the sense that they are not after a title. The fact that they wanted a co-principalship when either of them could have applied for sole principalship and probably been successful... that humility, I think, says a lot.*

### **Success factors**

Both co-principals referenced factors they saw as making a success of their joint role. Barbara signalled factors of complementary skills, building a trusting relationship, effective levels of communication, and clarity of values and vision as core contributors:

*William and I have got 10 years of having worked together as DP and AP closely, and so I know his skills and he knows my skills. I trust him and he trusts me. We've got robust ways of communicating. I can say to William "Look, we need to have a conversation. I'm not happy with the way this is going." So it's not the sort of thing you could enter into with an unknown [person]... I'm also saying you'd want to be really clear about what your values are, what your vision is for the school, what you expect....*

From William's perspective, he believed that risk-taking capability was a key to any form of leadership and an integral part of his own leadership success:

*Taking risks is part of, for me, growing and getting better and moving with the times – I mean it's 2019! We've had the internet, we've had changes all over the place in the world. So if we're still doing what we've done, then I don't think we're helping our young people to advance.*

He also observed that a successful co-principalship was dependent on a Board of Trustees who were receptive to the prospect of joint leadership, and who were willing to explore a non-traditional form of principalship.

An additional perspective came from student feedback as part of the first co-principal appraisal. The students surveyed believed that William and Barbara were accessible principals and were visible around the school. They also commented that, as a co-educational school, it was appropriate that a co-educational approach was modelled in its leadership where both genders were represented.

## Discussion

While Barbara and William are part of a leadership duo, they are each a “unique biosocial individual” (Stets & Burke, 2014, p. 70). They communicate their professional vision and belief systems by direction, word and deeds. While there is potential for fused identities in their joint role, both they and interview respondents insist that, while the work is collaborative, their personal and professional identities have not been subsumed by the job. Without reliance on leadership labels, they are authentic leaders in their own right which is acknowledged as such by the staff. They derive their professional credibility from their continued teaching, personal integrity and staying true to their values.

In terms of Heifetz’s (1994) concept of leadership with authority in adaptive contexts, the co-principals adapted their practice according to the presenting situation. For example, some situations may call for an extended time of reflection and consultation with significant others while, on other occasions, change decisions may require quick decision making and action. This dilemma of adapting the pace of change is referenced by Heifetz (1994):

In adaptive situations, fulfilling the social functions of authority requires walking a razor’s edge. Challenge people too fast, and they will push the authority figure over for failing their expectations for stability. But challenge people too slowly, and they will throw him [sic] down when they discover that no progress has been made. (p. 126)

By definition, a co-principalship runs counter to a hierarchical notion of senior leadership that is invested in one person and, in so doing, risks disorienting students, teachers and parents about the nature of principalship in the school and acceptance of the concept of a dual authority. That this co-principalship has been successful to date can be attributed to the known capabilities of William and Barbara during their previous time at the school; hence the maximising of building trusting relationships, positive communications, giving clarity to their values, and consolidating their joint vision for the school.

Despite their success, both leaders acknowledged challenges inherent in the joint position. The first was to identify and appreciate each other’s starting points when considering key strategic questions in their future planning:

- Where are we going to go next?
- What are we going to do that makes this a better place?
- What might that look like?
- Where shall we put our time and energy?

A second challenge centred on the concept of role definition and looking at ways to reduce duplication by, for example, not both responding to the same email. That has been an iterative process for the two co-principals as “we’ve been kind of knitting our socks as well and working it out as we’ve gone along as to who is better to deal with this, or is it both of us?” (Barbara).

A third factor lay at the problem-solving heart of any co-principalship: the challenge of succession planning in the event that one member of the leadership partnership leaves the school. This was germane to Holmdale where the staff had a high level of buy-in to William and Barbara's appointment, based around the complementary set of skills and experience offered by the two applicants: Barbara in curriculum development and pastoral care; William in strategic areas of finance and management.

There are undoubtedly both positive and challenging features of a co-principalship, and longer-term research studies are needed to understand fully the implications of shared leadership on teaching and learning, and on a school's wider community. Perhaps the first step is the most challenging of all: the decision for individuals to undertake a joint leadership role, as Barbara later concluded: "As a co-principal, it takes courage to step into the unknown and trust that you'll find your way".

### **National strategic planning**

How, then, might national policy planning play out in support of New Zealand educational leaders, and of distributed leadership practice in particular? In 2018, the Education Council published its *Leadership Strategy for the teaching profession of Aotearoa New Zealand*. Its Vision statement aims to "enable every teacher, regardless of their role or setting, to have the opportunity to develop their own leadership capability" (Education Council, 2018a, p. 4), with guiding principle (2) "to support leadership development across the teaching profession, and the policy and provision that will enable this to occur" (p. 6). While these goals are aspirational, it is pleasing to note an acknowledgement of a need to address areas of leadership underdevelopment viz. leaders in the early childhood sector, Māori medium settings, rural areas and school middle leaders.

Further elaboration on distributed leadership practice is located in the companion document *Educational Leadership Capability Framework* (Education Council, 2018b). The third capability focuses on building and sustaining collective leadership and professional community, in which teachers share their knowledge within an engaged learning community. In leading their organisations, teachers' individual and collective strengths will be drawn on, and "opportunities and support given to staff to grow their capabilities in leadership" (p. 9). An early childhood example is provided of strategies to grow leadership (Denee & Thornton, 2017). These included mentoring and coaching; the provision of resources and expertise; building relational trust; and designing systems and roles to support teacher leadership. The intent and aspiration for distributed leadership is evident in the two national documents. Whether there is the requisite resource and support personnel to make it happen is yet to be determined.

### **Future directions for distributed practice**

A useful point of departure for broader personalised professional learning can be found in one of the purposeful actions promoted in the Leadership Strategy document. It advocates "a

shared database of experts, organisations and institutions offering leadership learning that is aligned with the strategies and the system” (Education Council, 2018a, p. 15). In this regard, implementation is best served not in a centralised leadership centre but rather making use of enhanced qualifications through multiple learning providers in New Zealand universities, and multiple education support services that can offer leadership and management support to leaders in early childhood and school sectors. A major advantage of this confederation is the capacity to deliver regionally, using knowledge of each region’s educational leaders and their institution’s leadership needs.

There is also future scope for extending the leadership continuum to include more groups at the start of the educational leadership pipeline. In addition to identified groups of middle leaders, senior leaders, head teachers and principals, there is considerable benefit in including teacher leaders, and student teachers in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. In Scotland, for example, early career teachers are encouraged to begin professional studies through Diploma and Masters’ programmes in Educational Leadership. “Teacher Leadership” has become a developing theme in UK policy, research and literature over the past two decades (for example, see Torrance, Notman & Murphy, 2016) as teachers link their teacher leadership development to enhanced practice and possible career progression into formal leadership and management positions. Through policy planning and learning/support services, New Zealand now has an opportunity to focus much more on skill development and confidence among its potential educational leaders.

In like manner, there is scope to improve awareness and understanding of leadership at the ITE level. Some of my most interesting and energetic professional learning sessions have been with student teachers, as they contemplate leadership opportunities within the teaching profession. Even at this preliminary stage of their teacher education, they are keen to know more about what constitutes “leadership” in a school or early childhood centre, and to know that they have a number of leadership skills already that they can build on in the years to come.

A further implication for leadership practice centres on the need for educational leaders on the continuum to demonstrate sensitivities to particular context(s) in which their institutions operate. This relies on each individual’s ability “to read the complexities of their context, especially the people, the problems and issues, as well as the culture of the school and the community in which it is located” (Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2016, p. 200). Not only can this be described as contextually responsive leadership in a general sense, but also as culturally responsive leadership in the case of a range of ethnicities present in one’s workplace. This is underlined by the emphasis being placed on culturally responsive and relational pedagogies in our New Zealand classrooms for which each principal or head teacher, as the leader of learning, is responsible.

Nevertheless, the effective implementation of such pedagogies will continue to rely on the delivery of professional learning activities for teachers and school principals and for teachers and students (Berryman, 2013). As Robertson and Earl (2015) discovered in their research into the

leadership learning of over 200 New Zealand aspiring principals, changing teachers' dispositions about cultural responsiveness was an evolving process that “required challenging, reframing and changing [their] thinking” (p. 7).

## Conclusion

This overview of the field of distributed leadership, particularly in New Zealand, offers a broad coverage of a movement from sole leadership to the dual authority of a shared principalship. There are evident advantages to distributing leadership responsibility in educational settings: for example, more democratic approaches can lead to increased staff understanding and support for the institution's directions, and to “de-intensifying” workload pressures on one leader alone. Further research of distributed leadership practices could usefully be directed towards understanding why some practices do not work in certain contexts, and the extent to which the distributed model is dependent upon the capability and willingness of teachers to develop additional leadership skills and to assume leadership accountability.

This exploration of distributed leadership practice comes from the base of an adult-centric approach, where the focus is on teachers and their leadership needs and capabilities. Yet, ultimately, its success will be judged on the impact it has on students and their learning. There is a mutual influence process at work here and an interdependence that is far-reaching. In the end, we cannot claim quality leadership practice in the absence of student learning.

*He pai te tirohanga ki ngā mahara mō ngā ra pahemo engari ka puta te māramatanga i runga i te tiro whakamua*

*It's fine to have recollections of the past, but wisdom comes from being able to prepare opportunities for the future.*

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