

Courageous and coherent leadership required for excellent and equitable outcomes



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Abstract

The paper illustrates the complexity of leadership work, using data on the varying perspectives of middle and senior leaders about their own goals; the seriousness of the problems that they face in reaching those goals; and the perceived effectiveness of the senior leadership team.

The findings from these studies indicate that the basic leadership skills of problem analysis, focused goal-setting and close monitoring of progress towards goals are lacking in many leadership teams in secondary schools. These findings highlight the importance of a team of middle and senior leaders being aligned in their goal pursuit, being active problem-solvers and being prepared to take some calculated risks to gain improvements.

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Introduction

The New Zealand Government had, until recently, a 'Better Public Services' target of 85 per cent of 18-year-old school leavers attaining the qualification of NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement) Level 2. Improving outcomes for Māori and Pasifika was central to that target. Recent PISA data (May, Flockton, & Kirkham, 2016), however, shows that about a third of Māori and Pasifika are not achieving at acceptable standards and that this has changed little over time. New Zealand Ministry of Education data tells a slightly different story. Although New Zealand is not yet attaining equitable results for Māori and Pasifika students, this data indicates a slow but steady improvement over time (Education Counts, 2017). We will return to this apparent incongruity later.

The setting of a target is a practice soundly based in goal theory, which suggests that a few clear and challenging targets against which progress is monitored help to generate the extra effort needed to achieve priorities (Locke & Latham, 1990). In this regard, the government has done well to just set one memorable target. But the drive for the 85 per cent mark is, of course, arbitrary. This can be a tough target for schools in low socio-economic communities, where students may suffer from poor levels of prior achievement and have higher than average levels of absence or transience. Despite this, principals appear to have responded with energy and commitment in striving for that 85 per cent benchmark. Many have put a great deal of effort into designing curriculums that meet students' interests and needs.

NCEA context

Before going further, some explanation of NCEA is required. NCEA is a standards-based, modular assessment system that offers a lot of flexibility for schools to design their own curriculums. Schools can offer traditional academic subjects, vocational subjects and non-traditional subjects such as performing arts, and students can take a mix of these.

To gain a NCEA qualification at a given level, students are assessed against a range of standards in different subjects. Each standard represents a particular skill, understanding or competency and is worth a specified number of credits that, if achieved, counts towards the 80 credits required for a national certificate at that level (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, n.d.). Some standards are internally and others externally assessed. Schools and departments can select from a pool of different standards within a subject against which they assess student success.

The problem

This flexibility of NCEA is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength in that schools can design curriculums tailored to the perceived needs of students, which in itself can greatly assist schools to meet the target of 85 per cent, but it is a weakness in that the curriculum design and choice of standards used can also limit the opportunities for students to learn academically challenging material (Wilson, Madjar, & McNaughton, 2016). Because some standards are relatively easier or harder for a particular student or group of students to achieve, school leaders can select standards that measure skills or knowledge that is already well within students' existing capabilities rather than standards that are more challenging but could be achieved with focused teaching and learning. Although the latter approach may be more desirable educationally, the former is a very rational response to the 85 per cent target.

Researchers who focused on literacy practices (Wilson et al., 2016) found that in some cases, an unintended consequence of the way NCEA was designed was that Māori and Pasifika students and students in low socio-economic status (SES) schools were being denied opportunities to learn that were typically provided for other students. For example, Māori and Pasifika students were 'significantly less likely to participate in programmes that would have prepared them to achieve in the academically challenging but critically important disciplinary reading standards' (Wilson et al., 2016, p. 19). Many of these students were in classes where fewer disciplinary reading or writing standards were offered and where observations showed fewer opportunities to read challenging and extended texts. For this reason, the drive to improve statistics at the overall qualification level, although motivating, may also mean that many Māori and Pasifika students have fewer opportunities to attempt challenging academic standards and experience the teaching associated with those challenging standards.

Class organisational practices greatly enable these practices of differing expectations. Māori and Pasifika students are frequently streamed into classes that reflect teacher expectations of their NCEA result. Yet these grouping practices have long been criticised for the effect they have on teacher expectations and the creation of self-fulfilling prophecies, particularly with respect to minority ethnic groups who tend to be grouped in lower-ability classes. Recently, Schmidt, Burroughs, Zoido and Houang's (2015) analysis of 2012 PISA mathematics results focused on the relationship between SES, achievement and opportunity to learn (OTL), both within and between schools. Part of this analysis included school-level data on streaming and on use of within-class ability grouping as indicators of OTL. They found that 'student and school level SES

and OTL had a statistically significant relationship with student mathematics literacy ... and tracking and ability grouping were both negatively associated with student performance' (Schmidt et al., 2015, p. 374). Further, New Zealand and Australia had 'particularly large within school OTL gaps' (Schmidt et al., 2015, p. 376).

What is troubling about the course structures and standards being offered to students is that they are so strongly linked to SES and ethnicity, and they reflect an in-built bias about students' ability related to ethnicity (Wilson et al., 2016)—a pattern also established in other studies (e.g. Meissel, Meyer, Yao, & Rubie-Davies, 2017). It therefore seems that if leaders were to address some organisational and pedagogical features in schools (such as the way classes are structured and the amount of content and its level of challenge), they could significantly improve outcomes for students who are being disadvantaged. So why do they not?

The technical aspect of school improvement is now seemingly well understood. Evidence has demonstrated that a clear goal focus along with a process that involves investigating causes of problems and addressing them in tight cycles of 'small wins' motivates the school team and provides traction on improving outcomes (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Timperley, Kaser, & Halbert, 2014).

But, of course, nothing is quite that simple. Change is a deeply human endeavour. The dilemma for the leader is that they have to 'craft coherence' (Honig & Hatch, 2004) out of the tension between ambitious goals of excellence and equity and the need to reach an arbitrary target, and they must do this in a way that other stakeholders can engage with. The problem-solving must occur within a complex ecosystem involving a governing board, parents, students, teachers, numerous government departments, the wider community and, not least, the media who publish results and write stories about their interpretation of the data. The official and public perception of this data becomes a key driver for leaders. It is their 'shop window' attesting to school quality.

Just engaging the teaching staff in secondary schools in the nature of the problem of inequitable results may be a great challenge. These schools are typically large, with many longstanding staff members who can act as both culture-builders and culture-maintainers as they watch numerous principals come and go (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). School staff typically form subcultures around faculties or departments (Siskin, 1994) and this has a 'balkanizing effect' that can work against the creation of coherence. Departments often drive their own improvement agendas and goals rather than taking on the school's official goals and strategies. This lack of unity can actively undermine an improvement strategy (Siskin, 1994). It takes a shared understanding of the problem and a concerted cross-departmental effort

focused on the school's priorities to get improvement (Hofman, Hofman, & Guldemond, 2001; Siskin, 1994).

It is critical for principals and senior leaders to gain buy-in from middle leaders to the official goals, because it is the middle leaders—such as departmental heads and deans—who are the real instructional leaders for teachers in a secondary environment (Bendikson, Hattie, & Robinson, 2012; Siskin, 1994). It is only through them that coherence of effort can be achieved. These middle leaders have to agree, firstly, that the problem they are working on is both a priority problem and one that they can solve through perseverance. Secondly, they have to be prepared to support and apply the agreed strategies for improvement if a coherent cross-school effort is to be applied to the problem. For this reason, a principal's ability to define the priority problem, investigate the causes of the problem with stakeholders and plan to address it effectively is critical in creating within-school coherence and high expectations for student outcomes. Research by my colleagues and I (using questionnaires) into senior and middle leaders' knowledge of their own goals and perceptions about their problem-solving ability in 32 schools suggests a sobering picture of leadership capability.

Our findings

Goal knowledge

If the first step to school improvement is knowing what priority problem you need to solve, many leaders would fail at that point. When asked to recall their own student achievement and engagement goals, senior leadership teams were able to recall their school goals with about 55 per cent accuracy and middle leaders with about 40 per cent accuracy, suggesting about half the school leaders did not know their goals well enough to recall them. This pattern did not significantly change over time. Further, only about a third of the senior and middle leadership teams were sufficiently aligned in their goal knowledge to be likely to effectively progress their improvement agendas. This was not surprising given the number of goals and targets that schools typically had. While they had on average four goals, they had nine targets on average—too many to recall, let alone manage and monitor effectively.

Effective problem-solving

Effective leaders 'tackle the right problems in the right way' in order to reach goals (Mumford & Zaccaro, 2000, p. 26). The challenge is in deciding what problem is the priority problem (especially when there are many challenges, as there frequently are in schools serving low socio-economic communities) and what strategies will be effective in addressing it. We found that in the schools surveyed, the more serious the problem,

the less likely that it was viewed by middle leaders as being dealt with effectively. And often, what they considered serious were seemingly basic problems such as student attendance, lateness and students coming to school not prepared to learn (e.g. not having pens or books), along with undesirable variability in the quality of teaching practice. There is good evidence to suggest that creating an orderly environment is a prerequisite to gaining good academic results (e.g. Bendikson et al., 2012; Dinham, 2005; Jacobson, 2011; Louis & Miles, 1990). Noted Māori scholar Russell Bishop (2011) argues that Māori students can 'vote with their feet' and will turn up for classes when teachers work harder to create more effective learning environments. Yet many senior leaders did not know what their middle leaders perceived as problematic, nor how serious they considered these problems to be, and nor did they appear to be addressing them effectively.

Robustness of plans

The plans school leaders wrote to address goals ticked the compliance box. They all had the required goals and targets, and the targets were, on the surface, SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound). Leaders also tended to have some form of baseline data about qualification targets and usually named people to be in charge of strategies. These are all points we would endorse as effective in plans.

On the downside, however, baseline data was not always easy to find, read or make sense of because of the way it was set out, perhaps betraying a lack of deeper analysis and clear problem identification. And while we found that schools tended to put baseline data in plans for targets about qualifications, there was often no such data for other problems, such as poor attendance or frequent lateness—the fundamental problems that middle leaders identified as requiring attention. Most concerning to us, however, was the lack of detail about how progress towards the goals would be monitored during the year, as this is how an effective leader motivates a team.

Discussion: Barriers and opportunities to goal achievement

We started this paper by referring to the potential for misalignment between the major goal of equitable yet still excellent outcomes and the drive to reach the 85 per cent target. While the target is clear, and it certainly appears that schools from across a range of communities are committed to it, the best means of reaching that target in challenging environments has been left unarticulated at a national level. At worst, some schools may be 'dumbing down' the curriculum, believing that this in the best interests of Māori and Pasifika students and will improve NCEA results. If

that is being done across the system (which is my interpretation of the misalignment between PISA and NCEA results over time), leadership is maintaining the status quo rather than improving equity and excellence of outcomes for a significant group of learners.

Our findings also suggest that there is lack of goal clarity and pursuit of excellence at many levels. Basic problems seem to have been relegated to the 'too hard basket' in many schools, suggesting that leaders are not pursuing 'small wins' in systematic ways. This lack of coherent action on the part of principals and senior leaders is likely to impact trust in the leadership, and it may make teachers and middle leaders less likely to take risks to get improvement.

There are also signs of problems with system leadership. It is not enough to point to a target. At a national level, coherence between goals, targets and, most importantly, strategies must be discussed. Awareness needs to be raised about the risk that systematic biases and organisational practices will maintain inequity, and about the need to narrow one's focus in order to make continual improvements. The support of officials is required if changes are to be made for the better. If system leaders show their support for school leaders who take risks in the interests of serving all students well and are not just focused on getting the statistics to look good, more school leaders may be prepared to take risks and make changes that have been resisted to date.

Instead, our investigation revealed what appeared to be compliant but not necessarily effective behaviour on the part of many school leaders in setting and achieving targets that, although they may look good, may not be serving all students well and therefore may not be serving the best interests of New Zealand.

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