

Collaboration across New Zealand rural primary schools: A virtual learning perspective

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Key Findings & Recommendations

There are many challenges in being a principal in a small rural school in New Zealand, but when principals work collaboratively across schools they can relieve some of those challenges and provide benefits for their students and themselves. Key findings in this study indicate that being a principal in a small rural New Zealand primary school is both a rewarding and a challenging occupation. Working in often remote and isolated locations, within a small economy of scale and with strong interdependent community relationships, provides the context that creates unique challenges for principals.

Schooling policy and resourcing has a big impact on small rural schools regarding administrative burden on principals and limited resources with which to work. This was evidenced by the principals interviewed, when they discussed challenges that they had with access to PLD, support for special needs, and the wide range of agencies they had to engage with to be able to access support for their school.

Principals in small rural primary schools can feel professionally isolated. They value opportunities to learn and work together. The eight principals in this study all had experience of collaborating online. Accounts of their experiences highlighted a wide range of benefits for both themselves and their students, in providing a wider curriculum, developing digital fluency, reducing professional isolation, and relieving workload.

The principals were able to provide examples of ways of working together that they felt were necessary for successful collaboration and online teaching and learning. In addition, they identified a range of issues they felt were barriers to online collaboration. Tensions were raised between planning for a localised school curriculum and working collaboratively with schools from other areas. However, not all principals held the same views, and some provided a divergent viewpoint. For example, where one principal saw a challenge in the provision of

localised curriculum, another saw an opportunity to collaborate on a bigger picture inquiry and keep a local focus.

Differences of opinion were raised around children's learning needs being met through learning online. One principal expressed doubt about the capacity of online learning to cater for personalised learning needs, while another principal felt it was the ideal way to personalise learning for their students. One area that all principals agreed was that learning online was just one part of a child's learning experience, and, although valuable for broadening their opportunities, it is **blended learning** that is more important, as it enables a balance of hands on practical learning and opportunities to engage with others socially.

Discussions with principals on the future of schooling focused exclusively on online learning, perhaps due to the influence of recent media coverage of Communities of Online Learning (CoOLs). Principals did not think that online learning should or would replace traditional schooling, but would be a growing and accepted part of a child's education in the future. They didn't delve further into envisioning future schooling except to say that it would still require adult support and supervision, and a bricks and mortar venue for learners to gather.

Recommendations to schools

Although this study has focused on small rural primary schools, the benefits of online collaboration that have been described by the principals interviewed could be applicable to learners in any size school. Where schools are still working in isolated silos, principals and teachers could consider how they can begin collaborative relationships with others outside the school to extend the learning opportunities for their students and themselves. Lee & Ward (2013) outline steps towards collaboration in learning:

- developing a vision and having a clear educational focus;
- having strong leadership and support of the community;
- normalising the everyday use of digital technology in the classroom;
- providing support and professional learning for teachers;
- monitoring and reviewing progress;
- and understanding that it won't be easy and will take time.

Principals and teachers in schools who are already involved in collaborative learning online could consider how they can maximise their engagement so that potential benefits can be

realised for their schools and learners. Some questions to ask, in your school and with your collaborative networks, when reviewing participation in collaborative online learning could be:

- What are the learning outcomes we want for our children? Are we meeting them? Do we need to extend or change them?
- What are the benefits to for us professionally? Is there reciprocity in collaborating with others?
- Have we included our collaborative online learning as part of our schools' strategic goals?
- Have we integrated our collaborative online learning into our curriculum planning?
- Have we scoped our students' needs, and our teaching strengths and weaknesses so that we can provide targeted learning programmes?
- Are our children well supported? What strategies can we put in place to better support them if needed?
- What professional learning and support have we got in place for ourselves and our teachers?
- What outside help do we need from government? How can we advocate for this?

Recommendations to government

There are three approaches government should take to support small rural primary schools.

The first is to tackle the problems of rural primary school principals raised in this study.

This would strengthen rural communities and rural principalship as a profession. It would enable principals to more easily step out of their own spaces and work with others outside the school.

An analogy can be made to 'Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs' (Maslow & Frager, 1987). If children are hungry, cold and uncared for, they are not going to learn; therefore, if principals are overworked and stressed, they are not going to reach up to try anything new or different.

An improvement in staffing and resourcing and a reduction of administrative bureaucracy are needed to relieve the workload and stress of principals. The example one principal in this study gave of having 12 hours funded release to fill in an PLD application form illustrates how obstructive bureaucracy has become, and what a barrier it is to principals accessing resources. To improve staffing entitlement would provide greater equity for small rural schools and address a wide range of concerns: safety and supervision of children, stress and workload of sole charge principals, professional collaboration and support, recruitment and retention in rural and remote areas, lack of access to relievers, and supporting schools through fluctuating roles. This could be achieved by introducing a sliding scale for staffing allocation, lowering the threshold for

a second teacher (Lawrence, 2018), or through the provision of a second teacher in all sole charge schools.

Addressing the challenges of rural principalship as outlined in this section could provide principals with the professional status that should be afforded by their role. It would give them time to engage more fully in their profession and enable them to have a collective voice in education that comes truly from their sector. Currently this voice for the rural education sector often arrives second hand from principals who have been in rural schools formerly, or from others like myself who work with principals in rural schools.

Better working conditions and professional status could reduce the revolving doors experienced by some small schools where principals leave because of unrealistic demands, and could make principalship of a rural school a worthy professional goal in itself, and not just a stepping stone on a principal's career ladder.

The second approach is to ensure that new government policy around Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako, Communities of Online Learning, and the schools funding review is cognisant of the needs of small rural schools, and provide guidance and resourcing that support schools to collaborate online. Policies should be more flexible around how schools can collaborate, giving more choice to schools on who they work with, what their goals will be, and how benefits to learners are measured. Professional support and development for teaching and learning online should be available for classroom teachers to become confident online teachers and to better support their online learners. This gives recognition that quality teachers are key to learner success. PLD should be focused on understanding the nature of online learning and how children learn online; and that it is about enabling people to connect and learn through digital networks, and not just about technology platforms or software applications.

Thirdly, the government needs to reduce the digital divide for rural communities, both in schools and in homes. Although all rural schools are now connected to a national, managed schools network, the N4L, those that are in more remote areas are still receiving significantly lower bandwidth at only 10Mbps compared to 100Mbps received by other schools (Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, 2016). As fibre networks continue to rollout around the country, the disparity grows in rural areas where fibre may never be an option. Although the government is investing in increasing cellular networks, findings from this study show that, although families have access to internet with improved speeds, it is still unaffordable, and

children are missing out. The government should support the recommendations of Rural Women New Zealand (2014) to provide subsidies for rural families to meet the additional costs of broadband, and invest in alternative projects and emerging technologies to increase bandwidth to rural areas.

Recommendations for further study

This study has been focused on a small group of principals in small rural schools, who have been collaborating online and found that there are benefits to be gained for working in this way. There are several areas that could be explored further.

There are many principals in small rural schools who are working in professional silos and are not collaborating in ways outlined in this study. Further research across this larger group of principals could identify barriers and enablers to online collaboration. This research focus could be extended to larger schools in different settings to explore the opportunities collaborative online learning provides for a wider range of school settings.

Principals interviewed in this study identified a range of challenges in learning in virtual environments. Further research is needed into online and blended teaching strategies that focus on social engagement and interactivity, online programme development, and assessment.

During my research, I found very little literature that was specific to rural education in the New Zealand setting. Further research into some of the specific challenges raised by principals in this study could quantify the extent and impact of issues on rural principals, and assist in providing targeted policies and support that might result in keeping principals in rural schools for longer.

System change is in progress in the New Zealand education setting. Further research into rural principals' aspirations and beliefs about the nature and future of schooling and change would enable them to have a voice in shaping an education system that strengthens and supports rural schools and communities.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence that online collaboration can help to reduce some of the challenges faced by principals in small rural schools. Professional and social isolation can be reduced through access to a wider network of colleagues, workload can be shared through

collaborative teaching, and students can access a wider curriculum and develop digital literacies and key competencies through participating in online learning.

Some critics could see the challenge of rural principals presented in this study as a reason to close small schools, and put children on the bus to town. It is this type of response that silences the small rural community from raising issues that concern them. However, this should not be the case. Rural schools have a vital role to play in strengthening rural communities, and education in a rural school equips our children well for the future. Rural schools should be recognised and supported as a valuable part of the education system and of wider society. Principals who are well supported and collaborate in online communities can be just as connected and provide as many opportunities for their children as those in large urban schools. The solution doesn't lie in thinking narrowly by moving our children out to bigger schools, but in thinking differently by being more flexible, collaborative and smarter in our approach to rural education:

For the first time in history, school size, as measured by students in daily, physical attendance, is no longer a measure of a school's teaching capacity. In an open learning environment, it is the extent to which a school is networked that determines its teaching and learning capacities.

(Stevens and Stewart, 2005)

With fast, reliable internet, the small rural school that is open, networked and collaborative can increase its capacity to provide learning opportunities for both students and teachers.