Leadership in New Zealand high-needs schools: An exploratory study from the International School Leadership Development Network project

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ABSTRACT
This article outlines a research study into the perceptions of a small sample of New Zealand school leaders about the nature of leading in a high-needs school environment. Reflective data collected from leaders indicated that a broad-based concept of high needs centred on the socially disadvantaged world of families, student-related factors both inside and outside of the school, changing teachers’ pedagogy to meet students’ diverse learning needs, and specific contexts such as those found in geographically isolated schools. Common leadership skills and dispositions were identified in areas of pedagogical, personal and professional leadership that relate both to this high-needs study, and to generic New Zealand research findings on successful leadership practices in schools.

INTRODUCTION
The International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) project was established in 2012 as an eight-country research initiative of UCEA (USA) and BELMAS (UK), and is headed by the project’s two international directors: Bruce Barnett (University of Texas San Antonio) and Howard Stevenson (University of Nottingham). Two focus areas or strands for research investigation have emerged: leadership in high-needs schools, and leadership for social justice. Both strands have been engaged in small-scale, case study research which empirically explores these two foundational concepts before proceeding to more detailed research in the years ahead.

Within the high-needs strand, initial discussions among participating countries have revealed topical issues that will direct subsequent research pathways: (1) identifying local and national policies that impact on high-need schools; (2) ascertaining how high-need schools are defined across a range of countries; and
reviewing strategies to prepare and support school leaders in high-needs environments (Gurr, 2014).

This research study on preliminary New Zealand findings from the high-needs strand of the ISLDN project, begins with a brief commentary on its conceptual frameworks and related literature and examples of ISLDN research findings to date. It then situates the context of high-need schools in New Zealand and describes the methodological procedures used in this study. Research findings are reported in relation to how ‘high needs’ might be defined in New Zealand school settings, and what key skills and dispositions may be needed to lead a high-needs school. The discussion of findings presents links between this ISLDN study and selected literature, including a New Zealand study of the International Successful School Principalship Project [ISSPP]6. The study concludes by highlighting the pivotal role of contextually responsive leadership when working in challenging circumstances.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS AND RELATED LITERATURE
A major review of school leadership conducted in the UK by Pricewaterhouse Coopers (2007) concluded that there is a strong need to review leadership capacity in the sector. At the same time, the literature acknowledged the increasing complexity of educational leadership and, in particular, a greater turnover of principals in schools in challenging circumstances because the leadership difficulties they face are so acute and relentless (Harris, 2008).

Conceptual frameworks
Two conceptual frameworks inform the development of this research study. The first framework focuses on the concept of high needs in schools, and the different facets of ‘need’. A major factor in a high-needs educational environment is uniformly acknowledged to be one of social and economic disadvantage for families within the school community. Mulford et al. (2008) summarise this overarching factor of disadvantage:

Schools serving low SES [socio-economic status] families can find themselves in an ‘iron circle’ that begins with the family’s impoverished economic conditions that may involve unemployment, cultural, racial and/or linguistic factors, immigration, high mobility, family break-ups, malnutrition and other health problems, substance abuse, and low expectations including performance at school (p. 462).

The concept of high need is also intertwined with the concept of students ‘at risk’ in their learning. ‘At risk’ factors identified here include students with limited learning opportunities; minimal learning assistance in the home; limited financial and technological resources; and “lifestyle risk factors such as inadequate housing, frequent exposure to violence and poor nutritional habits” (Weldon, 2012, p. 1). However, Shields and Edwards (2004) advance a critical perspective from their Canadian research that many conceptions of “at riskness” promote deficit

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6 The ISSPP began in 2002 under the auspices of Professor Christopher Day at the University of Nottingham. The now 20-country (including New Zealand) project aims to move research attention away from effective schools to focus on factors behind principals’ success and how they maintain that success over time.
thinking, or rely on pathologizing the lived experiences of children (Shields et al., 2005), thereby perpetuating educational strategies that marginalize many of these young people.

Unsurprisingly, there is widespread support in the literature for the primacy of the principal’s role in influencing learning in high-needs schools (Crow, 2007; Day, 2007; Fullan, 2006; Klar and Brewer, 2013; Leithwood, Harris and Strauss, 2010). Consequently, there are also calls in the literature for broader forms of leadership development to enable school leaders to have greater contextual awareness and culturally relevant pedagogy to meet students’ learning needs. For example, Duke (2010) and Seashore Louis et al. (2010) advocate that high-poverty schools, especially large high-poverty schools, need leadership development programmes tailored to their specific needs. Barnett et al. (2012) make the point that leadership development programmes should also include assistant principals as they contribute vitally in supporting principals in leading school improvement strategies. More broadly, qualitative leadership research in ‘turnaround’ schools suggests how important it is for leaders to have the ability to tackle tough issues (Papa and English, 2011; Robinson, et al., 2009). Thus, there is a developing impetus in the field for not only strengthening school leader preparation programmes, but also for exploring new ways of contextualising principal learning to work across a range of school settings (Grubb and Flessa, 2009).

A second framework draws on a concept of contextually responsive leadership, whereby school leaders are “contextually literate” (National College for School Leadership, 2007) through their capacity to understand, and respond to, challenges presented to them by the environment in which they work. The mediation of variable contextual influences is an important leadership skill that underpins school improvement. Gu and Johannson (2012) contend that such improvement processes are likely to be “a product of the interaction between the moderating effects of schools’ external contexts and the mediating effects of their internal contexts” (p. 6).

The internal contexts within which principals operate can include the following influence factors: school culture, teacher experience and competence, staff morale, financial resourcing, school size and bureaucratic organisation (Hallinger, 2003). A move towards greater public participation in education (Woods, 2005) and the onset of school self-management, particularly in New Zealand, has led to growing demands for the democratization of leadership in areas such as school governance, and shared decision making among staff (Notman, 2014). External contexts impacting on teaching and learning have been well canvassed, including factors such as personal well-being (Mongan and Leadbeter, 2012), varying degrees of social responsibility, and cultural diversity of minority groups (Merchant et al., 2012). In addition, there are also wider political influences to be taken into account such as educational policy and regulatory requirements and school inspection agencies, and social influences such as each community’s values and expectations of educational outcomes for their children.

SUCCESSFUL EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

There is a growing body of school improvement literature around factors that enable principals to succeed in raising levels of student achievement, particularly
where they are working in challenging circumstances. Early findings from an initial group of countries in the ISSPP (England, the USA, Norway and Australia) identified successful principal practices in instructional leadership, capacity building and organisational learning, and understanding cultural diversity (Ylimaki, 2007). New Zealand research findings from the ISSPP centred on three leadership headings: pedagogical leadership focused on leading the core business of teaching and learning; personal leadership included skills and dispositions pertaining to working with people and building trusting relationships; professional leadership features included distributing leadership among staff and setting clear expectations for teacher performance (Notman, 2011).

Later results from the ISSPP and other international research on successful principals identified five key themes of similarity across countries and different contexts:

- Sustaining passionate commitment and personal accountability
- Maintaining moral purpose and managing tensions and dilemmas
- Being ‘other-centred’ and focusing on learning and development
- Making emotional and rational investment
- Emphasising the personal and the functional (Day and Sammons, 2013, p. 18)

There is research evidence that successful school leadership in high-need contexts reflects a number of the themes identified above. For example, the USA research of Jacobson and Johnson (2011) into high-performance schools in high-poverty environments has highlighted strategies used by successful principals:

Creating a safe, learner-centered environment; setting clear directions that include high expectations for student achievement and faculty performance; providing the time and opportunity for people to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to meet those expectations; redesigning the organization to remove obstacles and create structures that permit self-renewal and sustained success; and developing connections with the broader community and honouring the diversity it encompasses, were some of the strategies we saw utilized in high-need U.S. schools, in some schools more successfully than others. (p.566)

**LEADING HIGH-NEED SCHOOLS**

The ISLDN project aims to add to the developing research literature on successful educational leadership by identifying key demand areas of leading in high-needs schools. Recent research findings from the project’s studies in Australia and the USA will serve to illustrate the parameters of exploratory work so far. Gurr et al. (2014) report two contrasting cases of Australian principals leading high-needs schools: a suburban secondary school in Melbourne which was formed as a result of the closure and amalgamation of several failing secondary schools in the area; and an isolated rural school in Western Australia serving an Aboriginal community. Research findings identified four distinctive features of leading a high-needs school: that school context matters; physical and financial resources pale in comparison to the importance of human resources; experience of the principal is vital to address specific human needs; and the concept of self-renewal, where “perseverance, tenacity, self-belief, and moral purpose are needed to maintain school direction” (Gurr et al., 2014, p. 89).
A second ISLDN study was conducted of principals in two Latina primary schools in the USA\(^7\) by Medina \textit{et al.} (2014). One of the principals reinforced the interdependent nature of high-needs school leadership: “I see my leadership as really influencing the adults, meaning all faculty, staff, and the community… they, in turn, will affect what goes on in the classroom” (Medina \textit{et al.}, 2014, p. 94). The study concludes that the principals’ role within a high-need community is very much a holistic one, where the sample principals “exemplify how leadership must consider addressing socioeconomic issues, and unaddressed academic, emotional and physical issues colliding with learning” (Medina \textit{et al.}, 2014, p. 94).

In the following sections, the context of high-need schools in New Zealand will be examined, together with the results of three New Zealand school case studies that form part of a set of international cases undertaken within the ISLDN project.

**CONTEXT OF HIGH-NEEDS SCHOOLS IN NEW ZEALAND**

In the New Zealand educational setting, the definition of what constitutes a ‘high-needs’ school takes its origins in earlier research which identified contributing factors that placed a school ‘at risk’. Hawk and Hill’s (1999) eight-year research study of 24 New Zealand primary and secondary schools provides a useful background summary here. In this study, the researchers focused on schools that were ‘at risk’ as an organisation, rather than schools that catered for ‘at risk students’.

Firstly, research findings revealed a number of key indicators that could provide an early warning that a school might be at risk. These included falling roll situations with implications for reductions in staffing, operational income, and curriculum flexibility; a rapid turnover of teachers which may result in low staff morale over a period of time; unresolved conflict within staff, between staff and management, between staff and the Board of Trustees\(^8\), and within the parent community; poor quality of teaching; major financial problems or imbalances; and community discontent within the self-managing school environment. In the latter case, the researchers commented:

> The power of one unreasonable and determined individual should not be underestimated. One school we worked in had lost four Principals in six years and, in the final analysis, it was mainly a result of the bad behaviour of one parent who surrounded his/herself with others who gossiped and who acted on his/her suggestions (Hawk and Hill, 1999, p. 3)

Secondly, findings from this eight-year study pointed to factors that could contribute to placing a school at risk. A major factor centred on the school serving a low socio-economic community. The study noted that many of the poorest schools were well managed, had superb teachers and cared for their students in outstanding ways. However, “the financial and staffing fragility that results from

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\(^7\) In the USA, Latina/o students represent the fastest growing school-age population when compared to other ethnic groups (US Census Bureau, 2010).

\(^8\) New Zealand schools became self-managing in October, 1989. Each school has its own Board of Trustees which comprises the school principal, an elected staff member and three elected parent representatives. For each secondary school, there is an elected student representative who is a full member of the Board.
serving a poor community means that the schools are more vulnerable, are exhausting places to work in and have fewer resources to use in response to a problem that emerges (Waldegrave et al. 1997)” (Hawk and Hill, 1999, p. 5). Other contributory factors included inappropriate appointments where principals and/or deputy principals had been appointed at a level well beyond their experience and expertise; a lack of leadership training/support for principals and senior leadership team members; school-wide reviews and appraisals of underperforming staff and principals that were not honest, resulting in a lack of remedial action being undertaken; and, as identified previously, community conflict/factions and ‘power games’ played out to satisfy individuals’ personal agendas.

In addition, the study revealed the impact of centralised educational policies which were built around the concept of a prevailing market forces model of education that promotes inter-school competition and public accountability. Schools in an at-risk situation found themselves increasingly disadvantaged in the face of extra public relations costs required to compete for student enrolments. This is, of course, a universal challenge for educational leaders, as they attempt to meet competing demands of being an autonomous school while, at the same time, being subject to government policies that exert systemic influence over local responsibilities. As Fink (2010) argues, “there is a contradiction between the requirement for leaders to be visionary, creative and entrepreneurial and the policy realities they live with, which encourage leadership that is reactive, compliant and managerial” (cited in Higham, 2013, p. 15).

However, it should be acknowledged that there are centralised educational policies in New Zealand which attempt to address particular issues confronted by high-needs schools. For example, central operational funding is allocated on the basis of a school’s decile rating, to provide for equitable learning opportunities for its students.9 Similarly, the New Zealand Ministry of Education offers enhanced professional development assistance for teachers of schools “in need”, particularly in support of low achieving students in literacy and numeracy. Every country will have a band of low achievers. In New Zealand, Maori and Pacific Island students are disproportionately represented in this category.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

In 2012, a pilot case study investigation was undertaken of three primary and secondary schools in the southern region of New Zealand. This exploratory study set out to determine teacher and principal responses to a series of research questions about the efficacy of leadership in a high-needs setting. The two research questions chosen for this study are reflective of the overall aims and research directions of the ISLDN project:

9 New Zealand primary and secondary schools are given a decile rating from one to ten, with decile ten schools having the highest socio-economic status. The rating is based on families with school-age children and includes ethnic make-up, household income, benefit dependency, household crowding, and other factors.
• How is the concept of ‘high-needs’ defined in different New Zealand school settings?
• What are likely skills and dispositions needed to lead a high-needs school?

An emergent research design was used that approximated Maykut and Morehouse’s (1994) model which incorporated purposive sampling, quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection in natural settings, and inductive data analysis. This sits within an interpretive paradigm of multiple realities for both observer and observed, interviewee and interviewer (Morrison, 2012). The investigation employed a case study approach to explore real-life contexts of school leadership (Yin, 2012) within a bounded system of time and place (Creswell, 2013).

**Sampling**
This research study used purposive sampling to investigate high-needs leadership concepts in a sample of three New Zealand schools through a personalised, process-rich and context-based model (Bush et al., 2007; Notman, 2011). Using the principle of maximum variation, the researcher personally approached three different schools in the Otago/Southland region who had decile ratings of between three and five, as a measure of low to moderate socio-economic status: a secondary school (students aged 11-18 years); a rural area school (5-18 years); and an urban primary school (5-12 years). All school principals accepted the invitation to participate in the research study, providing variability in terms of entry level, school size, school curriculum, organisational culture and daily mode of operation.

**Data collection and analysis**
A mixed methods approach that permits data triangulation provided quantitative data through a 5-point Likert scale survey, which was administered to three principals and 10 teacher leaders (n=13). This survey assessed the importance to participants of a range of high-need factors, and provided opportunity for open-ended responses. Survey results were then used to help develop a relevant interview schedule which focused on the two research questions of defining a high-need school, and exploring leaders’ perceptions of skills and dispositions necessary to lead in a high-need environment. Thus, qualitative data was obtained through 16 semi-structured interviews of the survey sample above, with the addition of two teacher leaders and a Board of Trustees chairperson.

Quantitative data were analysed using an SPSS software program. Constant comparative analysis of the qualitative data proceeded concurrently with the collection of data in schools, so that the two become closely integrated in a process of inductive cross-case analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Interview data was subjected to open and axial coding processes that conceptualised and categorised data, while selective coding later explored relationships and patterns across categories in a regenerated array of concepts and recurrent themes.
In terms of traditional validity and reliability measures, this study followed Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) suggested criteria for qualitative research such as **transferability** rather than conventional external validity, where qualitative researchers “can provide only the thick description necessary to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility” (p. 36). They also suggest **dependability**, through participant checking on the fairness of the account and accuracy of particular information; and **credibility**, by engagement in the field and triangulation. The latter feature was achieved through comparing data from multiple perspectives such as survey method and interviews with principals and other significant school leaders. On account of the small sample size, there can be no claim made that research findings would be typical of other school leaders or of other specific high-needs contexts. Hence, it may be useful to think more in terms of reconstructed meanings that provide insight into each school’s high-need situation and its “circumstantial uniqueness” (Burns, 2000, p. 474).

**PROFILE OF CASE STUDY SCHOOLS**

The three schools selected for this research investigation reflected a mix of school type and geographical location. School A is a year 7-13 urban boys’ school with a student population between 800 and 900 students. It has held strong sporting and academic traditions that are being tested through a changed demographic of students now entering the school. These new student cohorts display high needs in terms of low levels of literacy and numeracy.

School B is a rural year 1-13 co-educational school which has approximately 180 students. Its challenges lie in its geographical isolation from major centres that, in turn, sees a proportion of their able 16-17 year old students leave the district to complete their secondary education at city boarding schools.

School C is an urban year 1-8 primary school in the roll range of 150-180 students. It is currently in a transition phase from being an intermediate school (years 7-8) to a full primary school specialising in the arts and technology. Its demographic draws on families from a predominantly low socio-economic area of the city.

**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

**Survey Results**

A sample of 13 primary and secondary leaders across three schools were surveyed about the importance they attached to school-related factors contributing to a definition of what constitutes a high-needs school (Research Question 1). Firstly, leaders’ perceptions of student-related factors are shown in Table 1. This Table presents results as percentages within a five-point Likert scale collated into three groupings, where each value varies between 1-2 (low) and 4-5 (high). The highest proportion of leaders (between 75% and 100%) identified insufficient

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10 Note that not all values total 100% on account of rounding to one decimal place only.
funding, low achievement in literacy and numeracy, low achievement of Maori students, and high occurrence of behavioural problems as major factors in determining high needs. In contrast, a lower proportion of leaders (approximately 46%) thought English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) constituted a high-needs factor.

**TABLE 1: LEADERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT-RELATED FACTORS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student-related factor</th>
<th>1-2 (low)</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4-5 (high)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low achievement in numeracy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low achievement in literacy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>92.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low achievement of Maori students</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low achievement of Pasifika students</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>69.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High number of transient students</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>69.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High occurrence of behavioural problems</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>84.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High proportion of ESOL students</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient funds available to support special needs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor social skills of students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>69.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leaders were also asked about their perceptions of teaching issues and the impact of such issues in defining high-needs schools. The results displayed in Table 2 indicate that leaders perceived a lack of leadership training as a major associated factor and strongly identified the necessity for high-needs leadership development to support them in their jobs.

In relation to teaching issues, data from open-ended survey questions pointed to ongoing financial dilemmas for mid decile range schools. In comparison to low decile New Zealand schools who receive additional government funding for learning programmes, mid decile schools are restricted because of a lack of funding for their proportion of high-needs students at the school. As School A’s deputy principal commented, “a school that is not ‘homogeneous’ struggles.”
TABLE 2: LEADERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING FACTORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Factor</th>
<th>1-2 (low)</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4-5 (high)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor school organisation/administration</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of professional development for staff</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>69.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of leadership training/support</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>84.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High staff turnover</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low staff morale</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low quality of teaching</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>69.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor staff inter-relationships</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of teaching resources</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>61.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked about their perceptions of the broader school environment, sample leaders showed less support for this area as an influence factor than student and teaching-related factors. For example in Table 3 below, a falling roll situation was the only factor to rate at nearly 70% of respondents’ views as a major high-needs factor. It was of interest to note that nearly 40% of the sample regarded socio-economic disadvantage as having a low to medium impact, and that urban (eight responses in the 1-3 categories) and rural school leaders (five responses in categories 4-5) were diametrically opposed in their views of the impact of geographic isolation as a high-needs factor.

TABLE 3: LEADERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT FACTORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School environment factor</th>
<th>1-2 (low)</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4-5 (high)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location in disadvantaged area</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>61.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic isolation of school</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intense competition with other schools</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falling roll situation</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>69.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavourable reputation of school</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>46.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor condition of school buildings</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>46.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High level of ethnic diversity</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location in disadvantaged area</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>61.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final survey question area focused on the impact of wider school community factors. Results in Table 4 suggest that sample leaders viewed listed factors as having a moderate to medium influence on creating a high-needs school environment but not at the strength of response demonstrated in student and teaching factors identified in Tables 1 and 2.
TABLE 4: LEADERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL COMMUNITY FACTORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School environment factor</th>
<th>1-2 (low)</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4-5 (high)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High level of community conflict/factions</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>54.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influential personal agendas of individual community members</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>46.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrealistically high parental expectations of school and students</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low parental expectations of school and students</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>61.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of parental support for school and students</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>46.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

INTERVIEW RESPONSES

A total of 16 school leaders agreed to undertake a semi-structured interview based on the study’s two guiding research questions: (1) How is the concept of ‘high-needs’ defined in different New Zealand school settings? (2) What are likely skills and dispositions needed to lead a high-needs school?

DEFINING ‘HIGH NEEDS’ IN DIFFERENT NEW ZEALAND SCHOOL SETTINGS

Across the three sample schools, there were factors which were commonly seen to contribute to a high-needs situation. These factors will be discussed under three categories: factors that are student-related as they impact on students’ lives both outside and inside the school; organisational factors associated with pedagogical practice; and factors linked to the context of the school.

Student factors

As is universally acknowledged, the socially disadvantaged world of families is a major factor outside of the school. Specific features noted by school leaders included social and financial deprivation; family violence; low parental support for, and expectation of, the school and student. The capacity for parents to support their children’s learning in the home was a particular source of concern for teachers and principals alike:

Social pressures of having to maintain one job, two jobs, three jobs at the same time as caring for siblings as well as the boy at school, was creating all sorts of difficulties. Linked with high poverty, then that made it difficult to get a supportive environment in the home, especially for literacy. [Principal, School A]

‘High need’ could also be defined within schools where a higher proportion of children than normal presented the following challenges. First, all principals made reference to the numbers of high-need students arriving at school with psychological issues that impacted on their learning, often accompanied by socialisation problems. Principals believed that, in an increasing number of cases, such issues were beyond the control and the resources available to the school. Second, closely linked to students’ personal issues was a resultant behavioural
dysfunction which exacerbated the situation of high need. The deputy principal of School A offered a personal view of behavioural issues that may not necessarily be linked to students’ mental health in her reference to a growing group of students who are indulged by parents and who have no behavioural boundaries set in place: “In my view, it is one problem that seems to go across all decile levels and seems to be one reason why high-decile schools might well be considered high-needs.”

Third, all respondents reinforced the factor of low competencies in literacy and numeracy, especially for Maori and Pacific Island students. National and international data underline the challenges facing New Zealand schools in advancing the achievement levels of minority ethnic groups, a point highlighted by School C’s assistant principal: “In 20 years' time, Pasifika and Maoridom will be a large percentage of this country. If they’re not performing, then we’ve got a problem.”

Finally, it was evident in the small rural composite school that it was presented with another set of student factors which differed from their urban counterparts. These factors centred on two aspects: the relatively high numbers of transient students whose parents moved around the country in search of seasonal work, particularly in agriculture and tourism, and the numbers of able senior students who left the rural school at age 16 or 17 to attend city schools. According to the principal of School B, “We lose traditionally about 30 per cent of our higher achieving students to boarding schools in the cities.”

Teaching factors
Two major teaching factors emerged as evidence of a high-needs school. First, a lack of professional development opportunity for teachers and school leaders, whether that be the result of inadequate funding or distance from providers of professional development. Second, of greater concern to the senior leaders was the quality of teaching in certain areas of the school, particularly where it is difficult to change teachers’ thinking and pedagogical practice to meet the diverse learning needs of their students. For example, teachers at School C had to make a paradigm shift in their teaching practice to meet the changed emphases within the new arts and technology directions of their primary school. Similarly, junior teachers at School A needed additional professional guidance to meet pressing learning needs in literacy and numeracy of their new cohort intake of 11-year old students: “And it’s getting the people in with enough frequency to be able to model what good practice is, and to be able to get the feedback and feed forward that we all need” (Head of Department, School A).

School context
The high-need factors identified in this category were particularly related to the geographical isolation of rural School B. Distance from major centres always creates pressure for delivery of school curricula in terms of increased costs for services and attracting teachers prepared to work in isolated regions. With transient adult populations and the attraction of employment opportunities in urban areas, some rural schools face additional high need caused by a falling roll situation, with its attendant problems of reductions in staffing, teaching resources, and range of student learning experiences. This falling roll scenario is frequently
brought about when senior students leave in Years 11-13 to attend city boarding schools. According to one of the teacher leaders, this presents staff with motivational challenges in terms of student achievement:

What happens is in a class, if you’ve got the high achievers, then the ones who are not high achievers get pushed into trying harder. Take away that top lot….. And they’re not kind of testing each other or pushing each other up. As a result, the danger is that they could remain down there. That motivation gets even lower or just remains stagnant, and that could be a concern in schools like this (Head of Department, School B)

While the above factors represent what could be described as ‘long term’ needs that might be addressed over time, there are also ‘short term’ needs which can arise. These can be episodic in nature and not infrequently associated with times of crises and trauma, as seen in New Zealand by the Christchurch earthquakes’ impact on schools, or when schools are called upon to deal with the traumatic circumstances of a student suicide. In these cases, such short-term high needs can be regarded as situational and context-bound and, as such, could be applicable to any school at any time.

SKILLS AND DISPOSITIONS FOR HIGH-NEEDS LEADERSHIP

The second research question for this preliminary study asked leader respondents to identify, from their experience of working in high-needs situations, key skills and dispositions which they believe are necessary to lead a high-needs school.

The Principal of School C, as did the other two principals, drew immediate attention to the importance of focusing on the core business of teaching and learning, and on developing positive learning relationships between teachers and students. In addition, common skills referred to among the sample leaders focused on sound planning and organisational practices, strong levels of communication with the parent community in particular, and well-honed negotiation skills in sourcing requisite funding from government social and educational agencies. Professional leadership skills were required in setting clear directions and modelling the vision for the school. Above all, there was a consistent call for high-needs leaders to have prior experience of working in a high-needs school environment or to have equivalent life experiences. For example, the Assistant Principal of School A comments:

If you’re dealing with high truancy or underachievement, then you need to have had a background to see where you can see where that’s coming from, where that attitude is coming from, where that perceived community or other outside influences are coming from. Because, unless you have an understanding of what that is, you’re going to struggle. If you’re teaching in a decile 10 school, you would struggle to cope with community management in a decile 1 school.

Lived experience and experiential learning on the job, especially through taking risks and making mistakes, were seen as prerequisites for successful leadership. The latter factor was essential, they believed, in order for a high-needs leader to display their disposition of empathy for, and authentic level of connectedness with, members of their wider school community. This connectedness at the human level is well summarised as follows:
In terms of us in a high-needs school, you need the leadership to be compassionate and aware of what’s going on in the community, and what the expectations – I’m not saying drop expectations – but be aware that there will be times when our expectations could be potentially very high and challenging for parents (Deputy Principal, School C)

Allied to this disposition was having the strength of one’s own convictions and belief system, not only to sustain themselves in the inevitable pursuit of social justice but also to support their leadership resiliency in the face of demanding and, at times, unrelenting circumstances: “It’s not what people think of me that drives me, but rather what I believe in” (Principal, School B).

Challenges for high-needs schools

Two distinct challenges arose from these case study findings in relation to effective leadership of a high-needs school. These can be identified as dealing with external social influences, and changing teachers’ pedagogical practice.

All case study schools made note of the disjuncture between the influence of the students’ world outside of school and the attempts of each school to deal with issues such as lack of parental support for learning and different behavioural boundaries at home. In most cases, more effective teaching, better engagement of students and more student-centred learning could help address these challenges. Yet there remains another challenge of how to deal with the growing numbers of students who, for example, bring psychological issues with them: 

But a kid who’s damaged, who’s been sexually abused, who’s been removed from his parents, where his father has walked out of his life, where he has witnessed a lot of violence, physical and verbal, where he is anxious and depressed – no amount of very effective teaching will bring that child to a point where they can socialise and engage in purposeful engagement in society. They need therapy, and it’s not available. (Principal, School A)

Second, case study principals and deputy principals referred to the challenge of changing teachers’ thinking and pedagogical practice in order to meet the range of high learning needs exhibited by students in the classroom. Building relational trust is seen as necessary to help teachers shift their thinking and to move out of their comfort zone where” often what’s comfortable is also what’s safe” (Assistant Principal, School B). In addition, constant administrative and assessment changes in the New Zealand school system have reduced time for teachers and heads of department/syndicate leaders to be led through such transformational change, and they are perceived to “disable” principals in following that pathway. Within this change process, there is also a challenge for leaders to have those “courageous” conversations with teachers whose practice requires improvement and who would benefit from double-loop learning processes.

DISCUSSION

In this Discussion section, major research findings will be linked to key concepts of ‘high need’ in schools and contextually responsive leadership. Links will also be made between the study’s findings and New Zealand research on successful educational leadership, in particular. The significance of school context will be
examined, together with a call for greater attention to be given to leadership and teacher preparation for working in a high-needs environment.

LINKING RESULTS WITH CONCEPTUAL LITERATURE

High-need student factors

In regard to the first concept of defining high needs, a major factor reflects the conceptual and research literature theme of the socially and economically disadvantaged world of some students. There is universal acknowledgement that low SES families are subject to disadvantage across a range of social, cultural, financial and relationship factors (Mulford et al., 2008). In their interview responses, school leaders indicated that they were very aware of students’ disadvantaged backgrounds but did not subscribe to deficit thinking that apportions blame to the community (Shields and Edwards, 2004). Instead, in most cases, they preferred to deal with the obstacles and learning challenges which students presented to them in the classroom. Interestingly, there was greater strength of reference from school leaders to social-economic status during their respective interviews than was displayed in their survey priorities.

A second high-need factor from this sample of school leaders was the low academic achievement of minority ethnic groups, particularly Maori and Pacific Island students, and their associated underachievement in literacy and numeracy. The New Zealand government is using targeted funding as a system priority in an effort to raise levels of achievement for these groups of students (Flockton, 2012). This focus is evident in government organisational directions for educational renewal in post-earthquake Christchurch, where it is proposed to establish a Maori Education Authority and a Pasifika advisory group to ensure that there is a learning partnership with the Ministry of Education as schools reform and rebuild (Ministry of Education, 2012).

The third and fourth high-need factors to emerge were identified as students’ overall low achievement in literacy and numeracy, particularly the former, and a high occurrence of behavioural problems in the school. While these two factors do not feature as prominently in the literature, nonetheless they are significant in the eyes of this group of New Zealand school leaders. Deep concern was expressed by all three principals during interviews at the increasing number of students presenting at school with behavioural dysfunction and associated socialisation, learning and psychological issues.

High-need teaching factors

A factor not widely acknowledged in the universal literature was revealed in leaders’ perceptions that high need was created in schools where teachers’ thinking and pedagogical practice did not keep pace with the diverse learning needs presented by their younger students especially. Additional professional development help was often needed to assist teachers to identify individual learning needs, and to deliver appropriate levels of learning support for each affected student.

As a consequence, the need for leadership training and support was viewed as a pre-requisite to enable senior leaders to meet high needs of both students and
staff. While not a high-need factor per se, there was a strong level of support among respondents to source relevant forms of professional learning (refer Table 2). The impetus for professional education in leadership is gaining momentum in the literature as recognition grows that leadership development programmes need to be targeted at those who choose to work in high-need school settings (Barnett et al., 2012; Duke, 2010).

**Contextual responsiveness**
In relation to the concept of contextually responsive leadership, there are other important considerations in addition to general student and teacher-related high-need factors. Firstly, for the Principal and leaders of School B, the challenges of rurality and geographic isolation stood in stark contrast to the operation of their urban school counterparts. Issues of costs of services, teacher recruitment, transient families and falling roll situations were all contributing factors in creating a high-need school environment. What is of concern is that the plight of small rural schools has remained constant within the New Zealand education system, in that these same issues were also identified in 1999 as part of Hawk and Hill’s study into schools at risk.

Secondly, it is evident from the research literature on leading high-needs schools that school context matters, as seen in Gurr et al.’s (2014) contrasting case studies of two Australian principals. Similarly, the USA study by Medina et al. (2014) underlines the interdependent links between school and community, where learning in the classroom intersects with socio-economic, emotional and physical issues impacting on students. In addition to personal and socio-economic features, there are also broader aspects for contextually responsive leaders to consider, such as the impact of the bureaucratic demands of educational agencies and political educational directions set by central government. The importance of having an acute awareness of context is encapsulated by the comments of one senior leader: “I think big-picture viewing is very important, particularly by the leader and Board [of Trustees] where they need to see the overall picture, rather than teachers who tend to deal more with small-range focused vision” (Assistant Principal, School C).

**LINKS TO NEW ZEALAND RESEARCH LITERATURE**
Apart from prior high-needs experience in schools or equivalent life experience, skills and dispositions recommended by a small sample of senior leaders to lead a high-needs school closely reflect a number of those identified in the New Zealand International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) findings of 10 case studies of successful educational leaders (Notman, 2011). First, the area of **pedagogical leadership**, where successful leaders maintain a strong focus on the core business of teaching and learning. Leaders hold a vision of teaching and learning that aims to increase levels of student achievement. They see possibilities and creative opportunities, rather than limitations, in their curriculum. Like leaders of high-needs schools, they do not engage in deficit thinking about student capability. Leaders encourage staff collaboration through stimulating learning conversations where teachers engage in knowledge creation and transfer that, in turn, can lead to changed pedagogical practices, a major teacher-related factor in
this high-needs study. Leaders also encourage explicit sharing of teaching and learning strategies, and place considerable importance on teachers’ ability to interpret student assessment data to help identify learning and skill development needs of individual students.

Second, successful leaders in this study are characterised by their use of a range of common **personal leadership** skills and dispositions. Here, principals model and build respectful relations within their wider community. These educational leaders are particularly skilled in people-based leadership, as are their high-needs counterparts. They demonstrate empathy, loyalty to school and community, and a sensitively expressed ethic of care. The personal and professional integrity of the leaders is acknowledged by significant others with whom they work closely. Trust building through positive relationships is a feature throughout all the leadership case studies, and particularly so with high-needs leaders as they seek to support staff in managing change in their pedagogical practices. Successful leaders understand the impact of working alongside teachers and parents instead of forcing an accommodation to fit their preferred way of working.

Finally, **professional leadership** strategies constitute the third success factor area. These strategies include adherence to a particular vision or clearly articulated philosophy. This is accompanied by a deep moral purpose embedded in their leadership and one which becomes apparent in times of dilemma decision making. Leaders use a culturally responsive style of leadership that incorporates a strong ethic of care. They aim to motivate quality teaching by setting clear expectations of teacher performance in order to raise levels of student academic achievement. Leaders build individual capability among staff through distributed leadership practices and thoughtful succession planning. Like leaders of high-needs schools, successful leaders develop an acute awareness of the world around them which results in a strong sense of advocacy, particularly for social justice in their inclusiveness of ethnic groups and of special needs students and their families.

In relation to more global research into successful personal and professional leadership in high-needs schools, there is a sense of finding oneself in the right context at the right time. According to Minor-Regan and Jacobson (2014) in a study of a USA principal of an under-performing school, it could be a case of a leader finding their “Right Mountain”. The key lesson to be learned from the story of this successful principal is to “develop and hone your technical competence and skill set, commit, serve and persist, and then make sure you have found a place where you can experience the true meaning of personal and professional success” (Minor-Regan and Jacobson, 2014, p. 17).

**SIGNIFICANCE OF SCHOOL CONTEXT**

The unifying theme of contextually responsive leadership is a recurring motif in both the ISLDN and ISSPP case studies in New Zealand. It reinforces Murphy’s (2013) assertion that successful school leaders have to deal with a contextual “consequence of plurality – plurality of interests, plurality of values and purposes, plurality of worldviews” (p. 114). The ISLDN New Zealand cases emphasise the importance of socio-economic and geographic contexts while Australian case
studies of two principals underline their national context of differences between high needs in rural and urban school settings, and draw attention to comparable contextual findings in O’Donoghue and Clarke’s (2013) edited work on the importance of context in post-conflict societies. Similarly, some of the New Zealand ISSPP case studies underline the importance of contextually responsive leadership. One primary principal’s case emphasises the need for a new principal to take stock of the existing school context before embarking on change processes. In an expanded view of contextual awareness, there is also a geopolitical and multigenerational context within which the successful principal of a Maori girls’ college works. The principal is herself Maori and is not only located in her Maori whakapapa (ancestry) but also in her daily work by “culture, ethnicity, political climate, time and space” (Notman, 2011, p. 141).

It is interesting to note that, in some systems developments in educational leadership and organisation in areas of high need, it is the adverse context itself which is demanding more creative and flexible thinking about strategizing how to address such need. For example, in reaction to the rebuilding process of a number of Christchurch (New Zealand) schools following the devastating earthquake of 2011, government officials and some school principals and Boards of Trustees have been moving towards the amalgamation of several neighbouring schools on a single site with a single governing body (Notman, 2015, in press). The aim of such amalgamations is to consolidate quality human resources and modernised physical resources to benefit, in these cases, the learning of both primary and secondary school students. This concept of school federations in areas of need is also taken up in the UK research of Chapman and Muijs (2013) whose findings suggest that “school federations may offer an alternative way of thinking about school turnaround as a collaborative, inter-organizational process rather than a mechanism for single organizational change” (p. 200). This supports a previous view offered by Foskett and Lumby (2003) that the enactment of management and leadership have both contemporary and future dimensions: “Managing the ‘here and now’ is a major challenge, but a key element of the task is to move the institution on, to align it with what society will demand of education and training in the future” (p. 153). In Hawk and Hill’s earlier New Zealand research in 1999, they had called for more leadership training and support to be afforded principals, senior leaders and teachers of at-risk schools. That call for universal action on training/support continues, for example, in sharing resilience strategies for those teachers working in high-needs areas (Castro, Kelly and Shih, 2010), and in promoting the advantages of networking with staff in other high-needs schools (Anderson, 2010).

Indeed, one of the ultimate aims of the ISLDN research project is to determine how best to prepare educators to be leaders of high-needs schools, whether that be inserting additional high-needs features into existing leadership preparation programs or establishing a separate entity altogether. When asked about their recommendations to support the professional learning of aspiring leaders wishing to work in high-needs schools, New Zealand ISLDN case study respondents were unanimous in their preference for a one term (10 week) module that could be taken up as a sabbatical leave project. This could see principal aspirants undertake an internship in schools of high need, with leadership research questions to be
answered during that time. Their period of leadership internship would culminate in a group residential program where the realities of experiential learning, together with aspirants’ in situ reflections, would be linked to the theory and practice of educational leadership and management. Whatever the future reality brings to the New Zealand principal preparation scene, the impetus from these initial ISLDN studies, together with increasing calls in the research literature, will focus further attention on the efficacy of leading in the specific context of a high-needs school.

CONCLUSION

A number of leaders in this research study commented that, for them, an underlying objective of leading a high-needs school was to guard against the loss of human potential among its students. As exemplified by the proposal for educational renewal in the high-need environment of post-earthquake Christchurch, “the cost of this loss of human potential is great, as evidenced in the lack of life choices, low self-esteem and limited life satisfaction, disconnection from the community and society… and the ongoing need for social support (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 12). This ultimate aim applies in whatever high-need situation that presents itself, whether that be a long-term socio-economic factor or the short-term, episodic nature of a natural disaster.

The findings from this small sample of case studies have served to provide insights into how one might define ‘high needs’ in New Zealand primary and secondary schools. It also suggests a range of skills and dispositions that leaders need to give strategic direction to the teaching and learning practices of high-needs schools. While a number of issues raised in this research investigation are common to all schools, there is an evident need to consider how leadership, and particularly contextually responsive leadership in a high-needs school setting, can best assist those students to access the school curriculum and succeed in it.

REFERENCES


