



Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Experiencing Being Judged: Making Visible School Community Expectations of Rural Principals

Kerry Earl Rinehart

Te Jura Toi Tangata – School of Education, University of Waikato

kerry.earlrinehart@waikato.ac.nz

Abstract

Judgements of the work of school principals may be formal through an appraisal process or informal from students, teachers, parents, and members of the community in which the school operates. This article focuses on New Zealand rural primary school principals' experiences of informal expectations—and judgements about whether they meet these expectations—from school community members. The aim of this study is to illustrate principals' work in responding to community expectations and the contextual factors of school settings, and to advocate for more overt policy and process attention to such work in the formal appraisal of principals. Using Deweyan pragmatism for a theoretical approach, research evidence was generated from semi-structured interviews with principals and ex-principals of small rural schools. Abductive analysis was used. Not only do principals' relationships with individuals and groups within their communities impact on their work and ability to succeed in their professional ambitions for school and students, but relationships between groups in the school community may also influence local judgements of that work. These relationships can be important aspects of schools' historical contexts. The time principals spend prioritising and responding to community expectations is notable and should be reflected in policy and processes of principal appraisal. Insights from this research are likely to be useful for principals and their mentors, as well as for facilitators of preparation programs and inservice professional learning for principals and aspiring principals.

Keywords: *school community, principals, preparation of principals, small schools, rural schools, New Zealand*

Introduction

One of the key assumptions framing this research is that school principals in New Zealand, as in many countries (but not all), are judged in three ways: 1) through formal regulatory appraisal processes; 2) personal reflections on their own work; and 3) and informally, and largely locally, by individuals and groups in their school community. I have written about these processes of judgement previously, using aspects of assessment to highlight the criteria or expectations on which judgements of principals' work are made and the feedback they receive (Earl Rinehart, 2019).

In this article, I focus on New Zealand rural primary school principals' experiences of informal expectations – and judgements about whether they meet these expectations – from school community members. Not addressed here are covert expectations specifically from schools'

Boards of Trustees, because these parents and community members also provide formal lines of appraisal of principals' work. I aim to illustrate principals' work in responding to community expectations and contextual factors of school settings, and I advocate for more overt policy and process attention to such work in formal appraisal of principals.

The term *school community* has positive connotations from the word *community*, suggesting a cohesive group of people, who are active and participatory in supporting their local school. Although frequently used, the term *school community* is rarely defined when mentioned in research literature or education policy. In fact, the term *school community* has several meanings: the school *as a community* (that is, the staff and students within the school as a learning community), the *community* comprising parents and families of enrolled students and school staff, or the *local community* in which the school operates. In this article, I use the term *school community* to refer to individuals and groups in the local geographical student catchment area who are interested parties in school operations. In this study, *school community* refers to the second and third options rather than the school *as a community*.

School communities are rarely homogenous, and they differ in size as well as social and economic affordances. At the local community level, it is not uncommon for schools in rural settings to have clear groups apportioned by socio-economic status, if not by values and aspirations. Individuals and groups in any community can vary in motivation of, and for, young people's schooling and expectations of levels of academic achievement (Budge, 2006). There is, then, both between and within group differences in a school community.

Communities also may vary in political and ideological standpoints. Different groups may have different views, such as landowners and farm workers, local business owners and the unemployed, and church attendees and the non-religious. Sometimes particular members of a school's community, such as landowners, can have historical connections and associated expectations of the nostalgic activities of school life and the role the school plays within the community (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Whether the school community meets, or not, these expectations will influence how a principal is judged by various factions, including parents.

In many education contexts, such as New Zealand, individuals and groups in the community are called on to provide official support for the school. In rural areas, the boundaries between school and the school community are often blurred. Community members, not just the parents of children at the school, are highly likely to be involved in a rural school (Dunning, 1993). Schools typically act as an employer in the area, providing work for a small number of other staff (mainly part-time), such as relief teachers, school office person/people, a groundskeeper, bus driver/s, and teacher aides. Although parents and businesses support the local school in urban settings too, in rural settings it is a small number of people who are available to volunteer for multiple roles, including fundraising and working bees and acting as audience, judges, and prize-givers. The community influences the local curriculum, school-community partnerships, and the educational aspirations of students and families.

The context in which a school principal finds her/himself is an important consideration in principals' work (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Robinson et al., 2009; Wylie, 2012). School context includes its geographic location, its socio-economic status, demographics and culture of the local community, and its broader policy environments (Diamond & Spillane, 2016; Hallinger, 2018). There are also a wide range of school-specific factors in play (Corbett & White, 2014; Thrupp, 2012), such as responding to diversity, inequities, and the special needs of students (Dunning, 1993; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Thrupp, 1999; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). The school's unique community has arguably significant local influence on the school and on the goals and priorities of principals' work (see Alcorn, 2011; Robinson, et al., 2009). Leithwood et al. (2020) remind us of

the importance of leaders being responsive to context and highlighting how effective school leaders understand and respond appropriately to the different contextual demands that

they face. ... A growing body of research now highlights how cultural, economic and contextual factors directly influence, and to some extent restrict, leaders' actions, practices and behaviours. (p. 9)

This acknowledgement that a school leader's actions may be restricted by aspects of a specific school setting is significant.

The school community has been recognised and promoted in principal appraisal (evaluation) (Hallinger 2018; Heck & Marcoulides 1992; Parylo et al., 2012). Relationships, networks, and partnerships are recognised in the literature and principal professional standards as very important (Leithwood et al., 2020; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2019). For example, building relationships is the second of four domains of practice for Leithwood et al. (2020). New Zealand's *Professional Standards for Primary Principals* (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2019) identifies one of four "areas of practice" as "partnerships and networks" (p. 42), suggesting that a greater range of relationships beyond parents and *whānau*[extended family] of current students should be considered. Each area of practice in this document has between four and eight standards. One of the partnerships and networks' standards reads: "interact regularly with parents and the school community on student progress and other school-related matters" (p. 42). What might be included as "school-related matters" is left open to interpretation.

To what extent community relations are viewed as the responsibility of principals and are used in principal appraisal varies (Parylo et al., 2012). Parylo et al. (2012) reported that evaluation in their US context had shifted from attention on management and relationships with people (staff and community members) to systems that are "data-driven" and "performance-based" (p. 224). Principals' professional learning and development also value experience in a specific school setting (e.g., Lairon & Vidales, 2003).

School communities can have high expectations of principals. Principals of rural schools in particular face pressure to meet community expectations (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). One such expectation is for rural school principals to attend community events. With varied stakeholders involved, it means that absences will be noticed and carry the risk of social offence (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Status as a school principal may include expectations that they play a leadership role in the community through memberships in local clubs and organisations. Not only are rural principals expected to be visible and accessible within school boundaries, but they are also expected to be visible in the school community.

Aside from parent surveys conducted as part of school operations and/or formal principal appraisal, principals experience community expectations through interactions with community members. The nature of these interactions reflects expectations with underlying criteria, used by individuals and groups to judge the school principal. Often these criteria are unspecified and unspoken. By increasing the visibility of informal and local expectations of school communities and the influence of these expectations on principals' work, I aim to contribute to how this work is valued.

It is important that criteria used in the processes of formal appraisal of school principals' work align with principals' day-to-day priorities and tasks. Not only will this alignment increase the trustworthiness and usefulness of principal appraisal, but what is assessed can have a powerful influence on what comes to be valued and included in preparation programs. In other words, by giving due attention to principals' work in responding to and negotiating expectations from individuals and members of school communities, formal appraisal will acknowledge and promote the importance and value of this work to principals' effectiveness and success.

Research Design

Researching principals' experiences of being judged within rural school communities enabled me to closely examine the expectations and judgements perceived by rural primary school principals in the New Zealand context. Principals and ex-principals of schools in rural settings were invited to participate in this study because community expectations of school principals are concentrated and visible in the principals' work situations. The special nature of typically smaller, community-based rural schools enabled research attention to focus on the expectations placed on principals that might be more difficult to observe in the complex organisational structures of larger urban schools.

For this research I used "*contemporary pragmatism*" (Rosiek, 2013, p. 693), which acknowledges changes in qualitative inquiry methodologies since Dewey's time, but continues to emphasise pragmatist ideas in educational research. The research question was: How do rural school principals experience judgement of their work by members of the school community? Potential participants were found using purposive sampling. Principals of smaller schools (in this study defined as up to 150 students and 6-8 teaching staff) and known ex-principals of rural schools, at a convenient distance for researcher travel, were invited to participate. This research gained Institutional ethical approvals and all names of participants are pseudonyms.

Six current primary school principals were interviewed three times face-to-face, and eight ex-principals were interviewed once. The interviews were semi-structured and averaged an hour in length. Evidence was investigated using abductive analysis (Brinkmann, 2014; Earl Rinehart, 2021), which utilises (re)sources of knowledge – intellectual, experiential, theoretical, evidential, situational, procedural, and intuitive – that a researcher brings to the interpretive process. This type of analysis is an exploratory, inferential, speculative, and creative process, whereby the researcher takes time to consider research evidence up close and from a distance (Earl Rinehart, 2021, pp. 305 & 309). Thus, abductive analysis is individual to the researcher while including the following actions:

- *taking time for immersion and familiarisation with the research evidence – deliberation – and time away for defamiliarisation and ideas to surface;*
- *bringing theoretical propositions and knowledge of previous study into play;*
- *resisting the temptation of early or rushed conclusions (Dewey, 1963/2015);*
- *valuing the possibilities in intuitive nudges from broader influences in life;*
- *tracing the "logics-in-hindsight" from evidence to insight/new knowledge by backward mapping: "Where did I get that idea?" Does this idea fit the evidence? Does this idea make sense of the evidence? (Based on Earl Rinehart, 2021, pp. 303–304, 307–309)*

In line with Dewey's thinking (1938/1986), my goal was not to arrive at any fixed and universal knowledge. Rather, it was to draw out the good or desirable in the present, in order to suggest ways of refining present activity for improvement in the work situations of rural school principals—in this case, improvement for principals in their decision-making and actions, in relation to their schools' communities, and increasing the visibility and value of this work.

Expectations from School Communities

Parents and other members of the school community have expectations of principals and provide feedback through informal, local interactions and communications (questions, requests, suggestions, and information shared), whether such feedback is sought or volunteered. Such interactions may be experienced by principals as judgements on their work and on themselves as individuals.

Sometimes community members' expectations of influence were perceived as demands. One principal referred to these as "complaints" in terms of the "drop everything" and "do something about this" response that seemed to be required. Questions that were directed towards the individual principal, such as "What are you doing about this?" Or "What are you doing about that?", point to the speakers' perception that a principal is the person with individual responsibility to respond, or that observable action is needed. Examples of "this" or "that" were wide ranging (from incidents on the school bus and in the playground, to lost property) and reflected community expectations of a principal's responsibility beyond teaching and learning concerns.

Suggestions from community members were based on their expectations of the school and the school principal (e.g., to do "more" or to do "differently") to provide and/or preserve opportunities for children within broader school life. Community members, often parents, questioned ways of funding school camps and advocated for agricultural days, more physical education, and more Kapa haka [a group activity performing traditional Māori dancing and chanting]. Some suggestions resulted in changes in school policy and practice; some did not.

Members of the school community expected principals to know what is going on, be responsive in a timely manner, and resolve everything to the community's satisfaction, while explaining their decisions and keeping everyone informed. However, there was rarely consensus in community views. This guarantees some dissatisfaction.

Knowing and Responding

All principals mentioned their need to monitor the "vibe" or "mood" of parents and the school as a community and the local community's response to the school. For most, the important aspect of their response to any issue was to act promptly, "nip [it] in the bud," and contain and resolve any situation as quickly as possible. This meant they had to decide on the next steps quickly, having considered many perspectives and needs. They had to be lateral thinkers. Principals understood that they were expected to handle whatever comes up and were responsible for everything. The principals in this study said that what they planned to do needed to take into consideration the inevitable "unexpected."

Visibility in school and being available was important. Being away from school when an issue arose could mean an issue grew disproportionately, involving extra work. Mickey told a story of an incident that happened when she was in the city for a meeting. On returning to school, she found that a situation had arisen and had escalated in that single day. Sydney highlighted the importance of being careful in how situations were handled and being seen to take concerns seriously:

We're pretty careful about how these things are dealt with. Otherwise they take on a life of their own. If something is alleged to have happened at school, and we don't do quite a thorough job of it, people will say that you must be covering something up... On the few occasions where this has happened, I think the way that we've dealt with it has kept things in proportion, kept the parents happy to know that you've taken it seriously... As a principal it would be really easy to spend a lot of time out of school to attend meetings, you know here, there and everywhere. But I think it is really important to keep that in balance and be in school.

The principals in this study felt they were expected to know everything. It is helpful when a parent or other community member is willing to share information, so that principals are alerted to something they appreciate knowing about. Sometimes these alerts come through serendipitous events. Information that could be acted on came from a variety of sources and was not always direct. One principal heard things through a friend's husband, who picked up talk

when out socialising: “He hears things said at the pub.” Individual principals also spoke of signs they noticed—through keeping “eyes and ears open”—that signalled potential issues.

Preventing “molehills becoming mountains” was a key task. Social media has the potential to allow principals to be alerted to concerns and for news to spread more widely and more quickly than might otherwise occur. One principal described how a community member could influence other people’s perceptions of the school through Facebook conversations, whether the principal was aware of it or not. Principals had concerns about being misjudged by public opinion through news about the school presented in mainstream as well as social media. Sydney was very frank in his awareness of potential mainstream-media involvement and how that increased the importance of his decision-making and actions in response to any incident:

We had a couple of occasions last year where things apparently happened at school that looked really, actually quite serious. If you just read the sort of headline, you'd go, “Oh my God!” ... It just happens, you know. It just happens, and boom, you have to deal with it. The big fear is of the media becoming involved and that's one that sort of hangs over you a bit too. Be prepared for that.

Responsibility for finding out what had happened and “fixing” it were seen to rest with the principal. Parents expected the principal to act. Principals felt they were expected to “be professional” and not be offended or “take it personally”. The principals spoke of the challenge and the importance of remaining patient, calm, and openly responsive, even when faced with angry parents, which happened at times. Ruby said:

I think there has been a lot of unfairness sometimes, but when people get angry – and parents are allowed to get angry to you, but you're not allowed to get angry with them. Rightly so – you're a professional, but some of it you have to take on the chin and it's hard but I ... I just get myself through it and say, “Yeah, but do you care about the child? Yes, I do, so we'll do this.” I don't always agree. I don't necessarily put in place everything that's demanded. But I will always have the reason why.

Resolving situations can take a lot of work. Principals needed information and often sought guidance from reliable sources. They needed to keep up communication with key interested parties, and record the decisions and actions taken in case of further accountability requirements. As Sydney explained:

You stop answering the phone, you stop doing your work, you get somebody else in to look after your class and you roll with that. You write it all down, and you record it, you record the conversations you have, you summarise it in a letter to the chairman of the Board of Trustees and all that kind of thing, just so the people that need to know are in the picture and you can be seen to have done a thorough job.

According to Doug, “something I've learnt too, is that that's when you'll fall over, if you don't keep the communication going at each step”.

The focus on communication and relationships with people is a strategy that Wieczorek and Manard (2018, also citing Chalker, 1999; & Hurley, 1999) suggest new principals adopt to respond to the challenges of community expectations. The work involved for principals in this study, but not visible to others, was also significant in terms of their response to and, hopefully, resolution of community concerns.

Competing Expectations

It was also important for these principals to have knowledge of the relationship between different members or groups in a school community, and how different groups relate with each other. Mickey and Nate, for example, spoke of two distinct groups in their local community with different educational aspirations, and Sydney spoke of how some strain was showing in

“established” parent attitudes, due to a growing school roll and new parents joining the school’s community. Given the competing expectations in a school community, reaching a resolution and communicating to everyone’s satisfaction was not always possible. Principals responded to parental concerns in ways designed to address the needs of those involved.

The smaller the school, the greater the likelihood that feedback would reflect partiality towards particular children or interests. Nate, for example, contrasted expectations between two small schools, one with fewer than 25 students and one with 45 students.

I think the smaller the context the more difficult those agendas become. I can speak from my experience in a sole charge school compared with a school with 45 students in it. In the sole charge school with perhaps a dozen families, each of those families think that they should have a key role in deciding what happens in school and there I could see very strong competing agendas. At times that is difficult to manage. I think the bigger the school becomes, people are more accepting of us running the school as a whole for the betterment of everyone. There is a bit more give and take.

Situations often involved information about the private lives of families that only the principal had access to. They described this information as privileged, because of its confidential nature. Doug pointed out that,

in small schools, parents do tend to be very close to the staff and to all of the children. So, if something happens, they feel the need really to be involved and informed. And sometimes you just can't—due to privacy and confidentiality issues—you can't inform people how you'd like to. And that's been a pressure in such cases, really. There's the tension that you're going to lose on one side.

In any situation, one “side” might have been critical and felt the principal did not handle the situation correctly, but the principal cannot always answer critics with full disclosure. In keeping confidences, principals cannot always fully explain their decisions or defend themselves publicly in the same way that they might have done if they could use this information.

Sydney suggested there would always be people who approved and people who did not approve, whatever one did.

Some will be quite vocal in telling you when they're not very pleased with the way things are going. And they're usually coming at it from some angle about something. What can you do? We'll never please everyone so we just sort of manage that as best we can.

This question of “What can you do?” highlighted how principals’ decision-making and actions were situational and realistic. Leithwood et al. (2020) proposed that principals should always ask “Under these conditions, what should I do?” (p. 10). The levels of knowledge and understanding within the three words “under these conditions” are critical.

Alongside the need for responsiveness to multiple interests was a sense of vulnerability and a self-awareness of principals’ decisions and actions influencing how they felt they were perceived. Joan spoke of a tension between expectations of members of the school community, professional expectations, and expectations of herself – between being approachable, professional, and accommodating:

Always in a small community, you're really vulnerable to comments that might be made about you. And you're really unable, or at least I felt unable, to defend yourself if there were negative comments ... It's a narrow path between professional and approachable. And when you are in a small school, that path is very narrow because you haven't got a whole series of levels that people can go through before they can get to you ... I try to see everybody's point of view, and I end up trying to bend over backwards to accommodate the views of other people, which I think makes me look weak, at times. You know, you try so

hard to do what people want, and, and keep within the bounds of what you're required to do.

Joan felt a rural school principal needs to be fair and accommodating to as many people's views as possible, while maintaining professionalism and considerations of official requirements. Her comment revealed a strong sense of principals' work as juggling and negotiating competing views and the need to be able to persuade others and justify decisions ("present my case well"). This is consistent with the characterisation of principals by Wieczorek and Manard (2018), who sought a balance between professional requirements and community obligations in order to fit into the culture of the community.

Being Rural

Being a rural school principal brings pressure to meet expectations related to their skills and status as members of a rural community. A principal's work could include managing animals, fixing the heating or water system, or maintaining school property. This practical, hands-on side to rural principalship can be a critical criterion on which a principal is judged by members of a rural community.

One principal told me that, when she was a new principal in the small rural school, she had rung the neighbouring farmer to move calves from the playground back through the boundary fence into the paddock. She rang a second time and the farmer's response was not as obliging as the first time. When the calves broke through the fence a third time to graze on playground grass, this principal knew that she would have to handle it herself. She felt, firmly, the expectation that the school principal should be able to move calves from the playground.

Joan told a story of a fundraising event for the school that involved one day's work in a shearing shed. The money the farmer saved on hiring, through having members of the school community undertaking stock and shed jobs, would be donated to the school. As a result of her efforts that day, Joan felt acknowledged as a hard worker, someone who would pitch in and give anything a go, and consequently, she felt an increase in her credibility as a member of that farming community.

Dana took an alternative approach. She deliberately positioned herself as "a townie," someone unfamiliar with the knowledge and handling of livestock in rural areas. She understood that she was recruited as "an outsider," to bring knowledge of the wider world into the school and increase students' educational aspirations. When Dana was faced with organising a Calf and Pet Day, she presented a clear sense of what was the Board of Trustees' responsibility and what was her work:

Because I just came along, a townie – "Don't ask me to organise pet calf days. That's not my area of expertise but go ahead" – rather than me trying to do it right. They ran it because they wanted to do it.

Members of school communities sometimes had to revise their expectations, and this included (re)learning boundaries about what a school principal will do.

Establishing Boundaries

Interactions with others begin to confirm or renegotiate existing community expectations about the role of the principal in relation to school operations and decision-making. When a principal is new to a school, professional boundaries may need to be established and reinforced. Although principals are seen to have ultimate responsibility regarding school operations (by school boards, by school community members and by the principals themselves), individuals and groups in the communities of small rural schools can feel a level of ownership – through local and multi-generational connections with the school. Patterns of interaction that predate the arrival of

the current principal possibly reflect interactions with a previous principal, and are an aspect of the historical context. Joan identified one of these instances in hindsight:

One day, some parents came into the school and decided that they were going to clean out the cupboards. Well actually, that wasn't their role. I should have said, "You can't do that, that's my responsibility." But I was pleasant and, I mean, they haven't thrown out anything I didn't want to throw out anyway, but it wasn't their role. It wasn't their role to come in and do that, and I should have stopped [it] – should have drawn the line there.

Joan recognised that there was a boundary in roles that she let these “helpful parents” cross, with longer-term implications for her relationships with community members.

The historical context and a principal's knowledge of this context influence initial encounters and, potentially, impact on the relationships that develop and on community perceptions of success. Turner (2011) discussed how individuals seek to determine the status of others through “cues about their relative power, authority, prestige, and claims to honor as well as memberships in differentially evaluated social categories” (p. 332). Ruby recognised one such challenge as it was happening, perhaps because she had already heard information about the couple. Ruby saw her role was to listen calmly, be patient and to “hear them out”:

I did have a husband and wife come and see me once, early on in my time here and they'd both been on the schoolboard, and I knew that they [had] caused a huge ruckus. They just wanted to put me in my place. So, I don't know, it was just all about them coming over here and asserting themselves a bit actually. So that was interesting, because I didn't really know the purpose of their visit, and I just said to them, "I can't say I agree with you" I just kind of stood up to them nicely.

Those parents may have been testing Ruby, as a new principal, by trying to impose their views on her or hoping she would grant them some degree of immediate influence. It does seem that, from Ruby's point of view, things worked out well as a result of this challenge being met.

Nate responded to community assumptions according to priorities that he had set for himself:

There are still people that assume you have got time. For instance... I had a class of kids at the pool and I had to say you know you will have to make an appointment to come and see me. I can't leave the kids at the pool... Certainly, I really protect that class time. I think that is really, really important if you are talking priorities. Spending time with guests that haven't made an appointment is not high on that list.

Even where the principal lives – in the school-owned house or not – can meet or counter community expectations related to notions of appropriate behaviour and status. Jim, an ex-principal, talked about his time as principal living in the schoolhouse. The challenge seemed to be about his membership of the community as a man and/or as a professional.

When there was a group of drunken men going home from the pub, they would often stop outside my gate and toot, and try and encourage me to go outside and have a beer with them before they headed off home. It was like, "If I keep my head down for a while they will go away." But they never did, they persisted. Pulling up at the gate, drunk driving home in those days, you know. That was a test. That was a test of who I was and what I would do, and what I wouldn't do.

Nate had originally occupied the schoolhouse when he first took up his position. A couple of years later, he had moved his family to a house close by, but out of sight of the school. This decision was not just because of parents who would phone up and ask if they could drop in and collect a child's jacket that had been left behind, requiring him to go over and unlock the school, but also because, if he saw lights on, Nate felt obliged to go back and turn them off to save electricity costs. Dana also had experience living in the schoolhouse at a previous school: “You're

in a fishbowl, because everyone's driving past the school. Everybody knows what you are doing, whether your curtains are pulled [past a certain hour of the morning], whether there are strange cars parked at your house."

On the other hand, Mickey had been a principal for many years and lived with her husband in the schoolhouse. Her children had gone to the school. As a family, they felt very much a part of the school community. Doug, however, maintained some distance for his personal life, by living in town and commuting to school. As Dana said, rural principals find *"there are pros and cons of both ways, living within the community and living out of it,"* in terms of the community members' expectations of the school principal.

Each of the principals in this study had drawn some boundaries around their work time. Each articulated how *"some principals"* might, but *"I don't"*, *"I can't"* or *"I won't."* Their availability on weekends might be confined to school fundraising, sports events, or festivals. For these principals, taking care to control the extent of their working week was a conscious attempt to sustain their ability to do the work expected of them over a longer term. Nate, for example, described principalship as *"a marathon, not a sprint"*:

I set reasonably firm boundaries around my hours of work at school because I have a family and I don't want to be an absentee dad. I don't want to my kids to grow up with dad not home for dinner, with "dad is working every hour god's given." I don't think that is what it's about and if it ever came to that I think I would be failing, you know, as a person. I would have to look really carefully if I could continue to be a principal if that was the case.

Mickey used school holidays to pursue self-funded professional learning opportunities and referred to these occasions as *her time*. She spoke of being refreshed through her attendance at such events during term breaks, which also meant she was away from the school and local community setting for a time.

Community expectations, particularly those that are unmet, or negativity towards the school can make principals' work more challenging, even untenable, impacting on retention (Hansen, 2018). It was possible to detect errors principals had made in the past, either their own stories or those known through other principals' stories. These included occasions when they were not informed or did not read situations early enough, and times when they failed to recognise when they were being positioned in certain ways, when a boundary was being crossed, or when they let key communications slide.

Principals in this study also described how dealing with feedback helped to develop their knowledge and skills over time. One principal, who could have been speaking for all, said, *"We have unusual situations – they're rare – but just a phone call or an email away from happening. I think the more times you go through it you get more confident in dealing with that."* Consistent with the findings of other research (e.g., Budge, 2006; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018), these principals developed their confidence, if not expertise, through dealing with issues, thus growing their ability to handle whatever might come up next.

Consistent with expectations in the *Kiwi Leadership for Principals* framework (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2008), principals in this study understood that *"everything"* that happens to do with *"the school"* was seen as their responsibility. To a person, they also held this expectation of themselves. Expectations of a school's community, therefore, impact greatly on how principals judge themselves. Informal judgement of school principals is of their interactions and relationships, decision-making, and management of issues and concerns.

Deliberations

Through examining how community expectations are experienced by rural school principals, ideas that individuals and groups hold about what school leaders should or should not do were

made visible to the principals through questions, suggestions, and information sharing within interactions. Principals in this study continued to learn to know the school community. As Bruce (2015) wrote, “*places aren’t just randomly interchanged locations in which to live and work: they are also imbued with meaning, memories, important people*” (p. 32). In rural settings and small communities, the nature of relationships with a school can be multi-generational and extend beyond family members (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). In such contexts, relationships between individuals and groups in the community can influence the work of the school principal.

Although diversity in school communities is acknowledged by New Zealand education authorities, principals are expected to respond to school and community needs and develop shared understandings, if not consensus, around school policy (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2008). How school principals read and respond to implied or explicit feedback within community members’ questions, suggestions and even demands gives them valuable information. When they receive feedback, principals can ask themselves: Who are they? What groups do they belong to? How much influence do those who have this opinion hold?

It is important that principals, especially principals new to a school, notice and recognise expectations held by others of how they will conduct their work and how they are being judged. Ruby recognised an attempt at positioning her when a couple who were no longer school board members came to talk to her as the new principal, and Joan felt an act of positioning retrospectively about the helpful women who came to clear out and organise a school space. Positioning is a largely conversational phenomenon: “*The way rights and duties are taken up and laid down, ascribed and appropriated, refused and defended in the fine grain of the encounters of daily lives*” (Harré & Moghaddan, 2014, p. 132). Positioning is what happens when participants in an encounter negotiate and confirm expectations, develop a relationship, and build trust (or mistrust). Along with determinations of status (Turner, 2011), an individual principal’s positioning will have an impact on what she or he may accomplish, or fail to accomplish, in their work.

Learning about the micro-educational context, the people they work with, and about themselves as a school principal, aligns with Clarke and Wildy’s (2011) focal points for school leadership (also, Lovett et al., 2015). Steffens et al. (2021) advocated for leaders to not only to learn about themselves as principals, but also to learn about themselves as members of “*the collective*” (p. 1). Rural principals are members of the community in which the school operates, so they need an awareness of how they present themselves as a member of that community. For example, an act of membership positioning for some rural principals is in whether she or he elects to live in the accommodation provided, the schoolhouse. Incidents and case studies in literature (e.g., Kouse & Posner 2007; Northfield, 2014) can be seen as attempts at positioning. Episodes in a principal’s autobiography could also be re-viewed as illustrations of attempts at positioning by the principal or by others.

Principals in this study spoke of experiences related to being visible, being professional, and being human. Evidence in this study affirms that principals need to be visible in, and accessible to, the school community (see Hansen, 2018; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Being visible enabled these principals to become known, to read/monitor the mood of the community, and develop relationships with those who might alert them to potential issues, in order to resolve arising matters quickly and carefully. They commented on the high demands of decision-making and work activity often associated with receiving information or advice and responding to inquiries from community members or groups.

These principals were sensitive to the likelihood of escalation of any concerns beyond the school gates. They were acutely aware of the need to maintain good relations with those around them and of how easily trust—and reputations—can be undermined and rumours spread. They agreed that principals need to be *alert for* and *alerted to* situations and events that could undermine community trust and confidence in the school (Ashton & Duncan, 2012). To secure credibility as

the school leader, the principal needs to meet or negotiate expectations, as the ongoing confirmation of expectations develops relationships and builds trust (Northfield, 2014). The principal's successful resolution of community, including parental, concerns – characterised by the concern being taken seriously and their response being careful, informed, and timely – can strengthen trust in relationships and give the principal more time, flexibility, and confidence, when handling inevitable future concerns.

In interactions with others who were demanding, partial, even angry, principals talked of remaining professional. The principals kept their own sense of purpose in focus (typically expressed as caring for the children in the school and their futures), sought information and advice from professional colleagues and networks, and gave due attention to communication and record keeping. Rural school principals come to know the private lives of families in privileged ways and are not always able to share what they know or defend their decisions by using this information.

Principals in this study have professional and personal boundaries for sustaining their wellbeing and role as a school principal. Reeves (2012) proposed that “*an effective leader is not simply defined by what [they do] but also by what [they choose] not to do*” (p. 240). Rural school principals juggle different regulatory, professional, and (potentially competing) community expectations and their membership of the community with personal and professional needs (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Having boundaries to their work lives and means of self-care were ways that the rural principals in this study sustained their commitment and resources to be a principal. Hougaard and Carter (2022) acknowledged the emotional load of a leader's decisions and actions that impact on other people. Leithwood et al.'s (2020) list of principals' resources includes “*perceiving emotions, managing emotions, acting in emotionally appropriate ways, optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, proactivity*” (p. 15). Sustaining the resources for the work of a school principal requires time and opportunity to do so. Hougaard and Carter (2022) see it as wise for leaders to be compassionate of themselves first, in order to have courage and strength, and to fully respect themselves in a way that leads to respect from others.

Close

The importance of knowing the community, including its historical context, is highlighted in this study. Principals need to continue to learn about each community they work in, and develop the kinds of relationships that support their being informed about what is going on. The complexity of a principals' relationships with members and groups of the school community may not be as noticeable in urban settings, but nevertheless, their relationships are likely to be influential aspects in a school's public reputation and student enrolments.

Along with others (e.g., Preston & Barnes, 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018), I would argue that the time principals spend in prioritising and responding to community expectations is important as a basis for their effecting change, for the reputation of the school, and for themselves as school principal. Principals' interactions help reveal, and potentially confirm or (re)negotiate, the expectations held by community members. Another aspect of this interaction is the establishment of principals' professional and personal boundaries to what they will and will not do in principalship, which can positively influence community expectations.

This study also highlights that relationships in principalship are not limited to a principal's relationships with others, but they also include relationships between individuals and groups in the community. Principals' relationships in leadership frameworks and professional standards as an aspect or criterion of quality principalship undervalue the complexity of these relationships with community members and how the school community influences the nature of principals' work. A principal's success at relationships with the school community depends on, and supports, the principal being informed about events and issues that directly and indirectly affect the

school. The significance, strengths, and nuances of local influences on principals' experiences of their work as school leaders and on the judgement of this work have to date been under researched.

Insights from this research are likely to be useful for principals themselves, coaches and mentors, and with facilitators of preparation programs and professional learning for principals. There is more work to be done to understand how the context of the specific school setting matters, and to explore the expectations, positioning, and constraints of community relationships in principals' professional work and preparation for that work. I advocate for greater research and policy consideration of the nature of a school's community, however defined. Future research needs to involve parents and the voices of community members on their expectations of school principals. School communities help shape principals' work; therefore, the nature of community, community expectations, and their influence on principals' work need to be more visible in policy, in the processes of formal principal appraisal, and in programs of preparation and support of primary principals in rural schools.

References

- Alcorn, N. (2011). Meat in the sandwich: The impact of changing policy contexts and local management of schools on principals' work in New Zealand 1989–2009. *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work*, 8(2), 122–140.
<https://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/handle/10289/6072>
- Ashton, B., & Duncan, H. E. (2012). A beginning rural principal's toolkit: A guide for success. *The Rural Educator*, 34(1), 19–31. <https://journals.library.msstate.edu/ruraled/article/view/405>
- Brinkmann, S. (2014). Doing without data. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(6), 720–725.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414530254>
- Bruce, G. (2015). Small towns: Have the goodtimes gone by. *North & South*, August, 30–37.
- Budge, K. (2006). Rural leaders, rural places: Problem, privilege, and possibility. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 21(13), 1–10.
https://archive.nwp.org/cs/public/download/nwp_file/10544/kbudge_ruralleaders.pdf?x-r=pcfile_d
- Clarke, S., & Wildy, H. (2004). Context counts: Viewing small school leadership from the inside out. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 42(5), 555–572.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230410554061>
- Clarke, S., & Wildy, H. (2011). Improving the small rural or remote school: The role of the district. *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(1), 24–36.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/000494411105500104>
- Corbett, M., & White, S. (2014). Introduction: Why put the “rural” in research? In S. White & M. Corbett (Eds.), *Doing educational research in rural settings: Methodological issues, international perspectives and practical solutions* (pp. 7–25). Routledge.
- Dewey, J. (1986). Logic: The theory of inquiry. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *John Dewey: The later works, 1925–1953: Vol. 12. 1938*. Southern Illinois University Press. (Reprinted from *Logic: The theory of inquiry*, by J. Dewey, 1938, Henry Holt and Company)

- Dewey, J. (2015). *Experience and education*. The Macmillan Company. (Original work published 1963)
- Diamond, J. B., & Spillane, J. P. (2016). School leadership and management from a distributed perspective: A 2016 retrospective and prospective. *Management in Education*, 30(4), 147–154. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020616665938>
- Dunning, G. (1993). Managing the small primary school: The problem role of the teaching head. *Educational Management & Administration*, 21(2), 79–89. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/174114329302100203>
- Earl Rinehart, K. (2019). Intelligent accountability evaluation of New Zealand primary school principals' formal appraisal processes. *Leading & Managing*, 25(1), 72–88. <https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/informit.757547783824304>
- Earl Rinehart, K. (2021). Abductive analysis in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 27(2), 303–311. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800420935912>
- Hansen, C. (2018). Why rural principals leave. *The Rural Educator*, 39(1), 41–53. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v39i1.214>
- Hallinger, P. (2018). Bringing context out of the shadows of leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 46(1), 5–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143216670652>
- Harré, R., & Moghaddam, F. M. (2014) Positioning theory. In N. Bozatzis & T. Dragonas (Eds.), *The discursive turn in social psychology* (pp. 129–138). Taos Institute Publications.
- Heck, R. H., & Marcoulides, G. A. (1992). Principal assessment: Conceptual problem, methodological problem, or both? *Peabody Journal of Education*, 68(1), 124–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01619569209538714>
- Hougaard, R., & Carter, J. (2022). *Compassionate leadership*. Harvard Business Review Press.
- Ishimaru, A., & Galloway, M. (2014). Beyond individual effectiveness: Conceptualizing organizational leadership for equity. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 13, 93–146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2014.890733>
- Kouzes, J., & Posner, B. (2007). *The leadership challenge* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Lairon, M., & Vidales, B. (2003). Leaders learning in context. *Leadership*, 32(5), 16–18.
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(1), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077>
- Lovett, S., Dempster, N., & Flückiger, B. (2015). Personal agency in leadership learning using an Australian heuristic. *Professional Development in Education*, 41(1), 127–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2014.891532>
- New Zealand Ministry of Education. (2008). *Kiwi leadership for principals: Principals as educational leaders*. <https://www.educationallleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Key-leadership-documents/Kiwi-leadership-for-principals>

- New Zealand Ministry of Education. (2019). *Primary principals' collective agreement*. <https://www.education.govt.nz/school/people-and-employment/employment-agreements/collective-agreements/primary-principals-collective-agreement/schedule-2-professional-standards-for-primary-principals/>
- Northfield, S. (2014) Multi-dimensional trust: How beginning principals build trust with their staff during leader succession. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 17(4), 410–441. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2013.825011>
- Parylo, O., Zepeda S. J., & Bengtson, E. (2012). Principals' experiences of being evaluated: A phenomenological study. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Accountability*, 24(3), 216–238. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-012-9150-x>
- Preston, J. P., & Barnes, K. E. R. (2017). Successful leadership in rural schools: Cultivating collaboration. *Rural Educator*, 38(1), 6–15. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1225156.pdf>
- Reeves, D. B. (2012). Power standards: How leaders add value to state and national standards. In *The Jossey-Bass reader on educational leadership* (2nd ed., pp. 239–247). Jossey-Bass.
- Robinson, V., Hohepa, M., & Lloyd, C. (2009). *School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why. Best evidence synthesis*. New Zealand Ministry of Education. <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515/60170>
- Rosiek, J. (2013). Pragmatism and post-qualitative futures. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 26(6), 692–705. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2013.788758>
- Steffens, N. K., Wolyniec, N., Okimoto, T. G., Mols, F., Haslam, S. A., & Kay, A. A. (2021). Knowing me, knowing us: Personal and collective self-awareness enhances authentic leadership and leader endorsement. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 32(6), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2021.101498>
- Thrupp, M. (1999). *Schools making a difference: Let's be realistic!: School mix, school effectiveness, and the social limits of reform*. Open University Press.
- Thrupp, M. (2012). “Raising our heads”: Keeping a critical eye on policy and research. In C. McGee & D. Fraser (Eds.), *The professional practice of teaching* (4th ed., pp. 308–319). Cengage Learning.
- Turner, J. H. (2011). Extending the Symbolic Interactionist theory of interaction processes: A conceptual outline. *Symbolic Interaction*, 34(3), 330–339. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/si.2011.34.3.330>
- Wieczorek, D., & Manard, C. (2018). Instructional leadership challenges and practices of novice principals in rural schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 34(2), 1–21. https://jrre.psu.edu/sites/default/files/2019-06/34-2_o.pdf
- Wylie, C. (2012). *Vital connections: Why we need more than self-managing schools*. NZCER Press.