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DEALING WITH DILEMMAS:  
A CRITICAL AND COLLABORATIVE  
APPROACH TO STAFF APPRAISAL IN  
TWO SCHOOLS

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A THESIS  
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ABSTRACT

A central intent of 'Tomorrow's Schools' reforms in New Zealand was to make schools more accountable for improving the quality of teaching by devolving responsibility for staff appraisal to principals.

The researcher sought to discover what kind of dilemmas arose for two principals in the context of implementing staff appraisal policy and how their theories of practice constrained their ability to resolve complex problems. Further questions were asked about how viable it would be to mount a critical and collaborative intervention to alter practice, how the impact of the intervention could be evaluated, and what the implications of this research might be for training principals.

The research shows that appraisal activity poses leadership dilemmas arising out of tensions between concern to meet organisational goals and concern for relationships among individuals. The principals responded by suppressing these dilemmas and avoiding threat with consequent ineffectiveness in the resolution of problems. Intervention within a framework of action research involved teaching the participants how to discover, critique and alter the values and beliefs which governed the defensive strategies that were counterproductive to their intentions to be open and inclusive.

The result of the intervention was that the schools developed appraisal policies that disclosed purposes related to both accountability and staff development.
At the interpersonal level the principals' attempts to counter unilaterally controlling and protective tendencies in their behaviour were blocked whilst in dialogue with others by their inability to articulate the conflict in values which was at the source of their appraisal dilemmas. The research illustrates the complexity and challenges inherent in learning the theoretical and practical curriculum in order to recognise conflict, respond to it, and develop critical dialogue skills.

The research concludes that training programmes for school leaders should accord significance to the expectations held of principals to perform a dual role as evaluators and developers of staff. A problem-based, interventionist form of training is recommended. Such training should focus on developing competence in critical and collaborative approaches for dealing with appraisal dilemmas.
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