Leading Queensland Schools: What some of the Research Can Tell us

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Abstract: This article takes a reflective look at a number of research studies published by the author in the past few years, each of which is located, in the main, in the Queensland (Australia) schooling context. It synthesises some of the key research findings from this set of studies and provides some useful perspectives on the state of our understandings about school leadership in Queensland to date, as well as identifying some challenging research fields for future work. The paper makes no claim to being a definitive or comprehensive statement about school leadership in Queensland – there is much quality work being undertaken by others. Further, such a review of so many studies can only highlight some of the most significant findings, such that readers interested in particular studies are encouraged to consult the original sources for further discussion. It is to be noted that many of the studies drawn upon are collaborative endeavours of the author and other researchers. Like shared leadership, shared research endeavours make the work all the richer, drawing on the different ideas and perspectives of the researchers.

Introduction

The organising framework for this article is drawn from some recent commissioned work undertaken by the author and colleagues for Education Queensland, the government authority responsible for some 1300 state (government) primary, secondary and special schools, and P-10 and P-12 colleges throughout the state. This work – elaborated on below – identified several significant themes in the school leadership literature (Cranston, Elrich and Morton, 2007). The themes were derived from a critical analysis of the existing school leadership framework, "Standards Framework for Leaders" (The State of Queensland, 1997), used by Education Queensland. The analysis involved detailed examination of 12 school leadership frameworks from various Australian and overseas education systems (such as the United Kingdom – England and Scotland – United States of America, New Zealand and Hong Kong); 23 books and/or relevant book chapters; and 12 journal articles/conference papers.

Framing this present discussion in this way in part addresses potential concerns about how the extant research under review might 'sit' relative to key findings and writings about

1Queensland is the third largest state in terms of population in Australia. It is a geographically diverse state with strong state (government) and non-state schooling sectors.

2Details of the Technical Paper (including a detailed Literature review) prepared for the review, including all references, are available at http://education.qld.gov.au/staff/development/docs/leadershipmatterstechpaper.doc
school leadership elsewhere. In a further effort to locate the studies discussed here in a broader context, some recent writings from the National College for School Leadership from the English context (NCSL, 2006) are integrated in the discussions as appropriate to deepen the reflection on the key messages to emerge from the Queensland research. The NCSL’s review, titled “What we know about school leadership,” drew on their commissioned research and evaluations, the outcomes of practitioner enquiries, seminars and think tanks, as well as literature reviews and work outside England and education (NCSL, 2006).

The Queensland “Standards Framework for Leaders” critique resulted in the distillation of the following themes about school leadership. A brief explanatory commentary is offered on each, together with inclusion of relevant ideas from the NCSL work.

**The need to contextualise leadership thinking (the NCSL noted a similar concept, context matters)**

Given the complex, changing and challenging contexts (local, national, global) within which schools now operate and the resulting impact on the leaders of these institutions, it is not surprising that there is a need to acknowledge context in our thinking about leadership. New ways of learning, of schooling and the overall impact of technology and globalisation are key notions here: the “past” does not necessarily prepare us well for the “future”. Leithwood has emphasised these points, noting that “…leadership cannot be separated from the context within which it is exerted. Leadership is contingent on the setting, the nature of the social organization, the goals being pursued, the individuals involved, resources and timeframes and many other factors” (cited in Davies, 2005: p. 9). Hallinger and Heck (1996) have argued that it is “virtually meaningless to study principal leadership without reference to school context” (p. 14). Clearly, leadership is highly contextualised. NCSL makes the point, challenging earlier conceptions of leaders as well as those currently holding leadership positions: “…there is no one way to lead a school. Leaders must act in ways that meet the needs of the schools they lead” (p. 5). It is important to note that this may seen as an interactive process, in which the school not only works with and responds to its community but, in some cases, takes a lead role in developing the community.

**Management is important**

The management aspects (including accountability) for school leaders must be attended to competently and are a vital element of the broader roles of such leaders. It is noted that the processes by which many of these are enacted in practice often require sound leadership capabilities.

**School leadership must be about learning (the NCSL noted a similar concept, learning centred leadership matters)**

There must be a fundamental emphasis on learning and development in our thinking about school leadership. This focus on learning is what distinguishes school leadership from leadership in other contexts. The vision to be fostered by educational leaders here is on

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2The potential irony of using (yet another) non-Australian set of ideas to help frame the discussion is acknowledged—the power of using it, however, derives from its consistency with the Queensland material. It might also be useful for international readers.
developing the learner-centred school that values learning for all. The fostering and
development of learning communities, seeing the school as a learning resource and hub for the
community, are key challenges for educational leaders. The NCSL argues that “schools
are places where children and young people are expected to learn” (p. 8) (author emphasis)
and that all in leadership positions in schools should be engaged in “distributing and
developing learning-centred leadership” (p. 8).

School leadership is a purposeful values-driven "activity" (the NCSL noted a
related concept, the core tasks of school leaders are clear)

While learning is the raison d'être of schools, school leadership ought to be a purposeful
values-driven, moral and ethical activity. Indeed, as the NCSL notes, "the work is highly
interpersonal, requiring empathy and sensitivity towards others ... concerned with caring
for and protecting vulnerable children and students" (p. 10). School leaders need to be aware
of their own values, beliefs and principles as well as those of their school, system and
community, and be driven to develop their schools as socially just and inclusive institutions.
Ethical dilemmas are common for educational leaders such that they also need capacities to
act ethically in challenging contexts where decision-making options appear equally
appropriate or attractive. Broadly related to this notion, and building on the work of
Leithwood's work (see for example Leithwood et al., 2006a, 2006b), the NCSL (p. 6) identifies
a set of four core leadership practices:

- building vision and setting directions
- understanding and developing people
- redesigning the organisation
- managing the teaching and learning programme.

Each of these ought to be linked to a set of specific and shared school community values.
However, as the NCSL notes, within the demands of the realities of school life, school leaders
can become constrained in some of the potentially more strategic aspects of their work.
Finally on this aspect, the NCSL notes that there are few studies into leadership for social
justice, "i.e. research on those leaders who frame their leadership as a quest for equity" (p. 7).

Educational leadership is a relational "activity" and is a distributed
"activity" (the NCSL noted a similar concept, distributing leadership
matters)

These two aspects in part go "hand in hand". Distributed, shared and multiple leadership
notions have emerged in the last decade or so as some of the more significant leadership
agendas (Harris, 2005; NCSL, 2003). Notions of empowerment, and working with and
through others are key principles here. In Queensland, Crowther et al. (2002) have developed
the notion of parallel leadership which draws on these agendas and earlier teachers-as
leaders ideas. The NCSL makes the important point that "you cannot have headteachers and
other leaders working beyond their schools unless and until other leaders are willing to 'step
up' and take on new roles and responsibilities" (p. 9).

Such collaborative, inclusive and co-leadership notions require school leaders to operate in
non-hierarchical, trusting and mutually respectful ways. To do so requires that school
leaders know their staff (strengths, weaknesses) and their communities, and can
communicate effectively with them to maximise the leadership capabilities in their schools.
The significant people-nature of what educational leaders do requires that they have excellent interpersonal skills, and are adept at developing sound relationships with diverse individuals and groups within and external to their school communities. Managing meaning for self and others, visioning, gaining commitment and developing collaborative partnerships are core responsibilities of school leaders. They also need to be astute managers of the micropolitics of their communities, especially as these relate to key leadership teams, such as senior management and executive teams.

**Paradoxes and tensions are inherent in educational leadership (the NCSL noted a related concept, school leadership is hard work and rewarding)**

A number of paradoxes and/or tensions are evident in considering the day-to-day operational contexts of schools. These include the need for school leaders to:

- respond to both local and system level demands/priorities when these demands might not always be compatible;
- be seen and act as the leader while empowering others for distributed, shared, multiple leadership roles;
- allocate limited resources in effective, efficient and equitable ways to maximise the learning of all students;
- drive a future-oriented sustainable vision for their schools in discontinuously changing and challenging times while managing the reality of "the now" of schools;
- achieve work–life balance when the professional and personal demands of being an educational leader are significant; and
- continue their professional learning journey, keeping abreast of educational and related developments and trends while managing the significant competing demands on educational leaders.

There are strong overtones here of Gronn’s (2003) notions of work intensification for schools leaders and "greedy work". The NCSL captures the challenge of dealing with such paradoxes and tensions as "juggling and plate spinning" (p. 11).

**Leadership in schools is changing and leadership development and succession planning has never been more important**

The first of these two final concepts noted by the NCSL is a somewhat self-evident conclusion that any one might draw from either the perspective of a practitioner (e.g. a school leader) or one engaged in studying school leadership. Quite simply, as the NCSL (p. 13) notes, "the leadership landscape is changing". The NCSL identifies a critical issue here for the future and that is the sustainability of leaders and leadership. They draw on Hargreaves and Fink’s (2006) ideas to note that sustainable leadership might be one of the next "big" leadership issues. This raises the question of whether there are different ways to "construct" the principalship in the future that might make it a more attractive and sustainable career option for talented middle-level leaders. There have been moves along this line in other education sectors in Australia (see, for example, Canavan, 2007) and elsewhere (see, for example, PwC, 2007) where various models of school leadership have been proposed. The NCSL re-emphasises Leithwood et al.’s (2006a) findings that leadership makes a difference to schools. It is not the only factor, but it is an important one. They note that "the development of leaders and leadership is becoming increasingly pivotal to the performance
and vitality of schools and the communities they serve" (p. 17). Distributing leadership is one place to start in this journey – it can increase opportunities for people to lead and develop skills in this regard and it can also facilitate mentoring opportunities of aspirant leaders.

The discussion now turns to examining the set of research studies within the framework of these themes. (Themes are noted in italics in the following discussion).

**What some Queensland research tells us about some of these themes**

As argued earlier, better understandings of school leadership gained through better understandings and appreciation of context are key matters for attention. That is, looking at context can help us see how school leadership is shaped and practised. One research study relevant to this was an in-depth look at the impact of school-based management reforms on primary school principals in Queensland (Cranston, 2002). This involved longitudinal case studies across 18 months of six principals (and their schools) involved in the reforms. Principals and district directors (the supervisors of principals) provided data via a series of in-depth interviews and focus groups. While it is acknowledged that generalising from studies of this kind can be problematic, the research identified a number of major tensions for principals including:

- trying to balance their leadership and management roles and responsibilities – for some, there was a sense of acting more like the Chief Executive Officer in a non-education organisation than being the leader of a school;
- in part, this resulted from having to deal with enhanced (system) accountability demands in a context of a rhetoric that suggested schools were, as a result of the reforms, operating with enhanced autonomy and local responsiveness;
- trying to maintain a lead role in learning in their schools when the reforms provided considerable distractions from that focus; and
- endeavouring to share decision-making (*leadership as a distributed activity*) while some teachers were reluctant to accept greater and changed responsibilities.

In short, what this research highlighted was a clear heralding of changing roles for principals which included a role shift away from the principal as educational or curriculum leader, to one of manager and (more) strategic school leader with increasing accountability demands. Emerging elements of Gronn’s (2003) intensification and greedy work were evident for many of the principals. Importantly, what these changed roles and responsibilities brought was a need for a changing set of capabilities for principals to be effective, emphasising the notion that *leadership in schools is changing*. Indeed, in this study, some older principals had difficulty adapting to the new dynamic operational contexts and struggled with the changing expectations placed on them.

Later system-wide research involving a questionnaire with all secondary school principals in Queensland painted a similar story of a struggle to achieve role clarification, especially across the leadership–management continuum (Cranston and Ehrich, 2002; Cranston, Ehrich and Billot, 2003). The Queensland element of this research involved an initial set of in-depth interviews with samples of principals, of district directors and of system-level administrators, followed by administration of the system-wide questionnaire to all secondary and P-12 schools, comprising both closed and open-ended items – over 100 principals from across Queensland responded.
It is noteworthy in this research that despite many principals reporting that they felt role ambiguity, role overload and role conflict, over 80% of them reported being satisfied or very satisfied in their roles. That is, school leadership was rewarding, despite them agreeing that school leadership was hard work, describing their job as characterised by high pressure, diversity and an expansion in roles and responsibilities. Clearly, the plethora of reforms, including the school-based management that many principals had been through, had signalled a clear new direction of what it meant to be a principal.

In-depth examination of the emerging tensions noted above for the primary principals regarding their leadership versus management responsibilities showed that when secondary principals contrasted their ideal or preferred week with their actual week, they noted that the former involved a focus on strategic and educational leadership, while the latter typically focused more on what might be seen as administration and management. Many principals noted, however, that they also saw management as important in their roles as principals. Notably, and not surprisingly, higher levels of satisfaction were reported where there was greater alignment between their actual role experiences and those they indicated as their preferences.

Key capabilities identified by principals as central to their roles included inspiring and visioning change for their school, demonstrating interpersonal and people skills and a capacity to delegate and empower. While they acknowledged that school leadership was changing, they also understood what their core tasks were, even if the intensification of their roles sometimes prevented them from carrying these out. From a professional development point of view, they indicated strongly that it was the leadership area that presented as the highest professional development priority. Since this research, there has been an acknowledgement of the changing role of Queensland principals such that the professional development offerings for principals, at least in the state education sector, are more extensive and quantitatively different from what they were just a short time ago. Professional development is available for principals at various career stages – from beginning through to highly experienced – and includes mentoring by personnel both inside education and from non-education enterprises, residential experiential leadership development programmes and challenging problem-based learning case-study workshops.

The organising framework suggests that the work of principals is fraught with dilemmas, tensions and paradoxes. One such set of dilemmas, those of an ethical nature, has also been the focus of research with Queensland principals (Cranston, Ehrich and Kimber, 2006). A qualitative research methodology guided this study because it was concerned with understanding phenomena from the point of view of the actors involved (Patton, 1991), that is the principals. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were held with seven non-state school principals from across Queensland. These school heads volunteered to participate in the research following invitations issued through the relevant independent schools heads' association. The model for considering ethical dilemmas discussed below (Cranston, Ehrich and Kimber, 2003) provided a useful framework for considering the interview data.

This research identified that ethical dilemmas were almost a daily occurrence for school leaders as they were called on to make a myriad of complex decisions in the best interests of their school communities. These dilemmas centred on making critical decisions, typically about the welfare, performance and the behaviour both of staff and of students. Adding to the complexities and challenges of such ethical dilemmas is the fact that in many instances, as Kidder (1995: p. 16) has noted, many do not centre upon 'right' versus 'wrong' alternatives, but often involve 'right' versus 'right' alternatives. Adding further to the complexities of
such dilemmas is that in some instances, within the complex contexts and circumstances in schools, it may not be so easy to discern what the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ option might be anyhow. That is, the potential solution path is often multi-directional.

The findings of this Queensland research broadly align with the conclusions reached in other Australian and international studies dealing with school leaders (see, for example, Dempster and Berry, 2003). The research suggests that ethical dilemmas are so common now that they have become the “bread and butter” of school leaders' lives. Important implications identified from this research related to the centrality of a strong ethical institutional culture in schools together with the need for ongoing support and development of school principals to assist their understanding and application of ethical decision-making practices. Significant in this research was that most dilemmas reported by principals were deeply dependent on the values and beliefs espoused by the school as well as the personal values held by the school leader(s) and others involved in resolving the dilemma – this reinforces one of the key organising themes noted earlier that school leadership is a purposeful values-driven ‘activity’.

A conclusion from this research is that preparation for, and support in, dealing with such dilemmas is difficult as there is no single set of (pre-determined) protocols or rules to follow. Each dilemma is typically a deeply personal matter – for the principal and for others involved – with multiple perspectives about the appropriate decision response and action. Such challenges also highlight the relational nature of principals’ work – interpersonal skills, problem-solving skills and conflict resolution among individuals and groups are just some of the capabilities drawn upon in such situations.

An important contribution of this facet of research is the development and application of an explanatory model of ethical dilemmas developed earlier by the researchers (Cranston, Ehrich and Kimber, 2003). This model identified a set of ten forces likely to be at play as individuals confront the ethical dilemma, together with a series of implications resulting from the decision taken. The forces related to professional ethics, organisational culture, legal issues, economic and financial matters, and societal and community characteristics. The model offers a powerful explanatory conceptualisation for a better understanding of ethical dilemmas and has been demonstrated to be an effective professional development “tool” to illustrate the forces and factors at play. The model provides school leaders with a reflective guide to deepen their understandings of ethical dilemmas and thus better prepare them for such challenges in the future.

A powerful theme identified in the review as noted above, and one now prominent in the broader literature, is that of leadership as a distributed activity. While there have been a growing interest and body of writing in this area (see for example, Harris, 2005; NCSSL, 2006), much research focus has remained on the principalship or headship. However, other designated school leaders – such as deputy principals, assistant principals and so on – have begun to attract attention in recent years. Important questions to be asked of these middle-level school leaders include what leadership roles, if any, they are playing in their schools and how they might view the principalship, particularly from the perspective that they represent one of the obvious pools for aspirants to more senior school leadership roles in the future. This latter point emerges as one of some interest because there is increasing evidence in many countries that there is likely to be a shortage of principals in the not too distant future (for Australia, see for example D’Arbon, 2003; Lacey, 2002).

A series of Queensland studies has examined this important, yet often overlooked, segment of school leaders. The first of these (Cranston, Tromans and Reugebrink, 2004), in part
paralleled the earlier study of principals (Cranston, Ehrich and Billot, 2003) but focused on the roles and responsibilities of deputy principals across Queensland state schools. Data were collected via a specially constructed questionnaire, comprising 25 closed items (about half of which contained several sub-sections within each), four open-ended items providing the opportunity for explanation of specific closed item responses, two specially targeted open-ended items and one general open-ended item. The questionnaire was distributed electronically to all state secondary schools in Queensland. Of these, 204 completed questionnaires were returned – a 51% return rate.

It is noteworthy that the deputy principals responded in similar ways to their principal colleagues on a range of matters. In particular, the vast majority indicated they were satisfied in their roles – importantly, this level of satisfaction was linked to how well the notion of team was developed among senior school leadership members. The deputy principals also indicted that they worked long hours, reporting (increasing) pressure and diversity as characterising their role. Like their principal colleagues, but to an even greater extent, they felt their role was strongly characterised by management and administration demands with little scope for those more leadership orientated.

Whilst the NCSL argues distributing leadership matters, as does Australian research (see for example, Mulford and Silins, 2003), operationalising this for middle-level school leaders may well be problematic. Importantly, those respondents reporting higher levels of satisfaction in their current role reported the focus of their job aligned with how they wanted it to be. That is, satisfaction was higher where a desire for greater leadership as a deputy principal was in fact the reality in practice. From an aspirant point of view, four in ten indicated they intended seeking promotion to the principalship, with about the same number unsure. Notably, the main reasons offered for not seeking promotion clustered around work-life balance and lifestyle reasons – the fact that the role of principal was too demanding also featured, echoing the dual concepts that school leadership is (both) hard work and rewarding.

A follow-up study with non-state-school middle-level school leaders in Queensland and New South Wales revealed similar trends to their state school colleagues (Cranston, 2006). A similar methodology was employed in this study, although the number of respondents at 46 was smaller. Of these middle-level school leaders, 90% indicated they were satisfied in their current role. Like their state-school counterparts, their work was characterised by high pressure, diversity and long hours. Also in a similar vein, they reported their work being dominated by operational matters, management and administration and staff, and community and student issues, while their preferred responsibilities were more leadership in nature – strategic and curriculum. Recent work in New Zealand along similar lines has revealed similar results (Cranston, 2007a).

From a distributed leadership point of view, there seems to be a potential leadership resource as yet untapped to any great extent, certainly if the preferences versus the realities of those holding such middle-level positions in schools are considered. A question to be posed is if such a shift were achieved, what happens to the management aspects of their role – who does these? Notably, the research with the middle-level leaders in both state and non-state sectors indicated that those holding such positions understood that management is important – they knew they if they were to be seen as credible among staff, they had to be attending to their administrative responsibilities. Does this then become a further case of distributing some of their management responsibilities to teachers and others?
This same middle-level segment of school leaders was further examined more recently to seek deeper understandings of their views about the principalship, specifically examining this group’s aspirations as future principals – the rationale for this focus was that they worked probably more closely with principals than anyone else in the school and hence would have unique insights into the role. This research (Cranston, 2007b) and its methodology built on the ideas from the related studies already noted above. A 39-item questionnaire comprising closed and open items was distributed electronically to all state primary and secondary and colleges across Queensland, targeting deputy principals. In particular, the questionnaire sought answers to questions such as what the views were of these potential aspirants about the principalship, their intentions in seeking promotion (or otherwise) to the principalship, and the reasons driving such intentions. A total of 146 completed questionnaires were returned – about half from each sector – a 15% return rate of the possible deputy principal pool. This is considered quite sound given, for protocol reasons, that the instrument was distributed “through” principals in the first instance, such that some deputy principals may not have received the invitation to participate.

On a positive note, and consistent with earlier findings, the majority of the research participants reported being satisfied in their current position, despite many of them thinking about doing another job in the future. For some, this other job was in the principalship as over a half indicated they would seek promotion in the future. At a systemic policy level, this ought provide some encouragement when thinking about school leaders in the future, although this optimism needs to be balanced by the responses of about half of this group who indicated they thought about working in roles that were not in schools or education. This represents a leakage of potential aspirants from the pool of next generation school leaders and raises further questions about their career aspirations.

The view of the respondents that they would like to see the principal’s role focusing more on strategic and educational and curriculum leadership and less – as they currently observed the case to be – on operational matters, management and administration is significant and is consistent with what principals themselves say about the reality of their roles (Cranston, Ehrich and Billot, 2003). In considering that leadership in schools is changing, any potential re-conceptualisation of the role of principals to one more leadership orientated raises a number of issues requiring close attention. Work–life balance, for example, continues as a dominant factor in the role and responsibility struggles for principals against a backdrop of work intensification for them.

The reasons identified by deputy principals in the research as influencing them to aspire to the principalship are based on what might be considered highly laudable principles, including wanting to positively influence the lives and learning of young people. It could be argued they are looking to the principalship for the “right reasons”. These deputy principals identified strong inter-personal and people skills, visioning and inspiring change among the school community, and acting ethically and fairly as key capabilities they believed they would need to hold to be successful as principals.

As noted earlier, the notion of team development among the senior leadership and management group in schools potentially makes an important contribution to sharing leadership across members of a school’s designated leaders, such as principal, deputy principal(s) and so on, reinforcing the notion of leadership as a distributed activity. Indeed, as the research noted above, how well developed the senior team is contributes to the level of satisfaction deputy principals felt in their role. Not surprisingly, the relational aspects of
leadership also become important in whether teams work effectively or otherwise. Emphasising the importance of distributed leadership, evidence is available from Australian research (see for example, Mulford and Silins, 2003) that how senior administrative teams operate makes a contribution to organisational (school) learning and the school having a community focus.

This team aspect of school leadership – senior management teams (SMTs) – has been examined from the framework of micropolitics. Micropolitics entail positive, cooperative and facilitative strategies that can promote and maintain collaboration and commitment among members of an organisation to achieve common goals (Blase and Anderson, 1995). It also has a "dark side" that can powerfully mitigate against effective team functioning. As such, knowledge and understanding of micropolitics is useful in enhancing the operations and effectiveness of SMTs. A critical review of the literature identified five issues or pointers important to the effective operation of SMTs (Ehrich and Cranston, 2004):

- the SMT must have clearly defined roles and objectives;
- SMT members must demonstrate competency, credibility and commitment;
- SMT members must have a shared culture, values and beliefs and effective teamwork processes;
- SMTs must have quality relations with other staff and effective communication with them; and,
- there must be learning opportunities available for members of the SMT to ensure competent operation.

Each of these presents as a major challenge to individuals in a team as well as overall to the team itself. Indeed, how one translates these into practice provided the focus of some recent developmental work in Queensland (Cranston and Ehrich, 2005). This work drew on micropolitical theory to develop a process for facilitating critical reflection of the processes, practices and dynamics of members of SMTs and the SMT itself in schools. Central to the process is the TEAM Development Questionnaire, an instrument purposely designed as a developmental tool for use at the school level to enhance SMT functioning and effectiveness. As noted above, the original impetus for developing such a tool grew from the data provided by SMT members in Queensland secondary schools, which revealed that teamwork and leadership characteristics of a school’s SMT were key determinants of respondents’ levels of role satisfaction. Specifically, respondents’ levels of satisfaction and self-efficacy as school leaders and managers were significantly correlated with the goodness of fit between how their SMT actually functioned and how they would ideally like it to function. This suggested that SMT dynamics were a critical factor in supporting, maintaining and promoting the leadership and management skills and aspirations of SMT members. To date, the TEAM Development Questionnaire and TEAM Process have had only had limited application. However, where it has – and where strong independent facilitation has been in evidence – significant improvements have been made in team effectiveness (Cranston, 2007c). There is considerable potential for further work here.

Returning to the themes of the importance of context when considering school leadership and that leadership in schools is changing, recent research across three countries – (Queensland) Australia, Canada and New Zealand – examined how principals managed ethnicultural diversity in schools. This is an increasing phenomenon in many developed countries; the impact of the global movements of people around the world has resulted in increasingly
diverse societies, and this has led to the complex and changing school environments facing principals today (Billot, Goddard and Cranston, 2007). This research involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with principals in the state schooling sector, from schools clearly evidencing ethnocultural diversity in their student population. Interviews were conducted with 14 principals, five of these in Queensland. The international nature of the study assisted in data interpretation and understandings, and allowed cross-country comparisons of findings.

Two major themes were identified in this research and these are similar across the three countries: ethnocultural diversity is evident in many contemporary secondary schools in all three countries, and how principals perceived and managed the resultant challenges was similar across the three countries.

The notion of diversity, "defined" in the Queensland context, embraced a variety of notions including a wide range of characteristics of students, such as those recently arrived in the country from ethnoculturally diverse backgrounds (refugees from African states, for example), those of indigenous backgrounds and those returning to school as adults after poor schooling experiences as young people. Importantly, among these different "groups", diversity can be further "defined" along socio-economic and ability dimensions.

Notably, the Queensland principals in this study did not see the ethnocultural diversity of students as a disadvantage or a problem; rather, it represented just one characteristic, albeit an important one, of their school to be "managed". In fact, for most it was seen as a strength and one to be celebrated. These attitudes and beliefs probably reflected a certain quality about the principals in the study that made them stand out; namely, that when these principals reflected on their own capabilities and values, many of them had a different point of view from their mainstream secondary colleagues. Perhaps there is an important message here that context is indeed important, suggesting that when one considers leadership and leaders, recruitment and selection ought to take due account of school characteristics.

This research echoes the arguments of Dimmock and Walker (2005) that "given the multi-ethnic nature of schools around the world, leaders nowadays shoulder responsibility for shaping their organisations in ways that value and integrate heterogeneity into successful learning communities for all" (p. 4). Consistent with this, this research across the three countries concluded that successful school leadership in such ethnoculturally diverse schools requires four principals' principles:

- a strong commitment to social justice principles, with these embedded in school practice and culture;
- an acceptance of difference and the capacity to work across various cultures, accommodating differences and using these as strengths;
- the setting of high learning expectations for all students and avoiding an "excuse culture"; and,
- the celebration of the diverse ethnocultural nature of schools, with cultural and sporting activities that respect and highlight individual and group differences.

These principles echo not only that leadership in schools is changing and that context matters, but that school leadership is a purposeful values-driven activity. It might also be noted that leadership development both for incumbents and aspirants to schools exhibiting high levels of ethnocultural diversity becomes a matter of some priority.
Concluding Comments

This article began by describing a set of themes distilled from a recent review of school leadership literature undertaken in the Queensland schooling context, and supported by recent work from the NCSL in England. These themes were used as an organising framework to review a number of recent Queensland-based research studies looking at various aspects of school leadership. In essence, what the review indicated was that school leadership has changed, and is changing, and that as never before it presents as a highly demanding distributed-values-driven activity. It is characterised by paradoxes and tensions, with leaders needing to draw on strong interpersonal and relational skills to meet the many demands the role presents. Importantly, its distributed nature requires that principals need to work with and through others to achieve school goals, emphasising the increasing importance of school leadership and management teams – formal and otherwise. What needs not to be lost in the changing conceptualisations and understandings of school leadership is that the prime priority is one of learning. How that priority is maintained in a context of change and work intensification remains as one the enduring challenges for all in school leadership roles. While the focus in the studies has been on Queensland school leaders, recent large scale in-depth research provides more comprehensive data and insights into some of these matters at an Australian level (McKenzie et al., 2008). There is not space to examine this in any detail here, but this research provides findings on issues related to changing roles and responsibilities of school leaders and matters related to their career satisfaction, plans and aspirations.

An important reflection on the studies discussed in the review here is that none has focused directly on the school leadership and student learning nexus. While learning has not been a main focus of the research, it has been evident, at least in a secondary sense, in some of the work. For example, one of the key points made by some of the principals in the study on ethnocultural diversity was that the diverse and different backgrounds of students was not to be seen as an excuse for accepting lesser learning outcomes, echoing the NCSL argument that “schools are places where children and young people are expected to learn” (p. 8.) (author emphasis). Further, the studies on the roles and responsibilities of principals and middle-level school leaders (Cranston, Ehrich and Billot, 2003; Cranston, 2006) indicate that many holding such positions currently struggle to be more involved in the curriculum leadership of their schools under the pressure and distraction of other demands on their time. This clearly presents as a significant area for future research with some of the work emerging from other recent studies (see, for example, Mulford, 2008) offering some potentially fruitful avenues for consideration. It should also be noted that there has been research in related areas in Queensland with one large longitudinal study still under way (Lingard et al., 2003).

It is clear that many of the research findings discussed here are not idiosyncratic just to Queensland schools. And it must reiterated that there has been, and continues to be, much quality research in school leadership undertaken by colleagues of the author. While there will always be a certain uniqueness of context emanating both from school systems and individual schools, the research resonates strongly with that in the wider international domain – the NCSL work provides evidence for this. What can also be noted is the rich field for future research that flows from the work discussed here. Potential questions such as the following offer enormous challenges for researchers, especially as quality research takes time; yet time is not something that we have in abundance as change, in
education and beyond, is rapid, discontinuous and challenging. This situation is exacerbated as often policy makers want quick answers to complex research questions. The following questions are offered as examples of a much larger canvas of possibilities. They are not necessarily new, nor have they not already been part of the thinking and work of scholars. But they endure as warranting attention as much for their importance for education as for the fact that answers to them remain elusive.

- How can we conceptualise a future school leadership differently, and how can it be practised effectively, so that it becomes a reflexive, flexible and rewarding profession, attractive to the "best" and "brightest" aspirants for all our schools? And how can this conceptualisation retain learning as its prime focus amid the constraining forces of role intensification?
- How can education systems, policy makers, academics and others with a deep interest in school leadership maximise their contributions both to those in leadership positions now, but also to those likely to be leading our schools in the future?
- How can researchers shift their focus from one that is typically of a reactive nature (what is happening now) to one that is proactive (what’s most likely to be happening in the future) so we blend the best of what we know now with imaginative creatvity of the future school.

How one begins to respond to such questions and the myriad others equally worthy of our efforts is a major challenge. Perhaps the starting point, however, is to seriously grapple with Pascale’s (1990) challenges of breaking the chains of the old mindsets: to learn and grow from our past research endeavours, but not be constrained by them. The Queensland research reviewed in this paper offers a small step along the journey of better understanding Australian school leadership. It also hopefully offers a platform on which some of the necessary future research might build.

References


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