BUILDING A CAPACITY FOR SHARED LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS

TEACHERS AS LEADERS OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

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Introduction

Due to successive movements of school reform in response to significant global and societal changes, the role of schools as sites of both academic education and cultural transmission and renewal continues to undergo change. As a consequence, the challenge for leaders in schools to establish and sustain positive learning environments, and employ pedagogical practices that lead to improved outcomes for a more diverse student population, has intensified and become more complex. Governments and education authorities have recognised this and have initiated moves to enhance the exercise of leadership at all levels throughout schools (eg. new Government Institutes for teachers/teaching and school leaders). Many in the profession are delighted that the skills and professionalism of teachers are being acknowledged, at last, but are concerned that these expectations have been introduced without making a commitment to providing adequate time, support and resources for teachers.

In addition, changing demands within both society and schooling appear to giving rise to a relatively new trend, namely, an increasing number of younger teachers who do not see teaching as a long-term commitment. Leadership for Student Learning (IEL 2001) made the point:

Disillusioned by daily, even hourly, indignities such as ceaseless interruptions by public address announcements, being ordered to “teach to the test”, and a legion of others, 30 per cent of all new teachers now last less than five years, while half of those in urban schools are gone within three. They see little hope of gaining the respect and relative autonomy that a true professional usually expects.

To the extent to which these conditions are perceived to exist, they are not conducive to a significant number of teachers being willing to take on additional responsibilities of leadership; rather they are more likely to result in teachers restricting themselves to their classrooms. Further, some researchers have made the case that:

... as a matter of personal choice rooted in their own personalities and value systems, teachers crave neither the limelight of public attention nor the responsibilities and headaches of leadership of any kind outside their classroom fiefs (IEL, 2001, p. 8).
The discussions surrounding the extension of leadership in schools, as well as ways to better engage teachers in school leadership, have taken a number of forms in the literature, including recommendations for ‘shared leadership’, ‘distributed leadership’, ‘teacher leadership’ and ‘teachers as change agents’.

**Shared Leadership**

Duignan et al. (2003 – SOLR Project), advocate the need for an important shift in the meaning, perspective and scope (depth and breadth) of leadership in schools, in order to build organisational cultures that promote, nurture and support leadership and leaders. They refer to this change as, ‘Building a Culture of Shared Leadership’ in an organisation.

Many educational leaders, especially principals, often find themselves isolated and alone, believing that they are, primarily, responsible for leadership in their schools. Such a stance constitutes a very narrow view of leadership. Principals, especially, need to be secure enough in their own identity to freely share and distribute leadership responsibilities among teachers and other key stakeholders. In this way, they are more likely to create school cultures where key stakeholders, especially teachers, students and parents, willingly take responsibility for the leadership of their school community. Such a shared approach to leadership in schools is receiving strong support in the literature on educational leadership. In Australia, the work of Crowther et al. on Parallel Leadership is the most influential (see Crowther, et al. 2002a; Crowther, et al. 2002b).

It seems timely, therefore, to take a fresh look at how a shared leadership capacity is generated in schools. Shared leadership, as both concept and practice, should be reinterpreted to include the contributions of all who work in the organisation. Leadership is not the property of any one individual (The Boss) or group (Executive Team). It grows out of the shared vision, beliefs and efforts of a committed group of teachers who have a sense of belonging, a sense of being valued members of their school community and a deep commitment to collective action for whole-school success (Crowther et al. 2002b).

While the language of leadership is replete with the jargon of sharing and collaboration (e.g., inclusivity, caring; collaborative decision making; empowerment of followers; shared vision and
goals), too frequently, the language constitutes a hollow rhetoric that is never actualised. There is a need to make this rhetoric the reality for all school members, especially teachers.

Sharing leadership with others, requires a rethinking of what constitutes a workable philosophy and framework for leadership in schools and how best to enable all school personnel, especially teachers, to feel a deep sense of commitment and belonging. There is little doubt that the evolving complexity and uncertainty of life and work in schools compels educational leaders to work more collaboratively with a growing number of people. This involves creating new collaborative learning communities that can embrace uncertainty and paradox.

We live in a messy world where complex, even paradoxical problems cannot be isolated out from their contexts. Most school-based problems constitute situations that are rich in values, dilemmas and paradoxes that often have no single logical solution (Duignan et al – 2003 SOLR Project; Duignan and Collins 2003). Principals, therefore, can no longer rely on leadership philosophies and management practices that were developed for past conditions and circumstances and that tended to focus on the principal as the leader or manager of the school.

A contemporary view is that leadership in a complex organisation, such as a school, requires the energy, commitment and contributions of all who work there. From this perspective shared leadership is a product of the ongoing processes of interaction and negotiation amongst all school members as they go about the construction and reconstruction of the reality of living productively yet compassionately together each day. Leadership, therefore, can be viewed as a shared communal phenomenon derived from the interactions and relationships of groups. Duignan and Bhindi (1997: 201) argued this same point when they stated that “the quality of relationships greatly influences everything else that happens in organisations, including the quality of leadership”.

It would appear, therefore, that a new paradigm of the principalship for the 21st century is emerging. Principals can no longer lead complex organisations (schools) on their own. As long as the belief predominates, however, that ‘the buck stops on the principal’s desk’, true sharing of leadership is unlikely to occur. Those in formal leadership positions will need to ‘let go’ of the idea that leadership is hierarchically distributed and commit to growing and developing leadership, as a shared phenomenon, in their schools. They will also need to develop more elaborated understandings of the nature of the leadership that is shared and the factors that influence teachers’ attitudes to sharing. To achieve these conditions, they need to facilitate people in learning how to learn together so as to develop collaborative and shared mental models and meanings that bind them
together as teams in a learning community. The key emphasis is on learning together, sharing and creating processes and conditions that encourage everyone in the school community to be effective learning resources for each other. This is, in essence, what is meant by sharing leadership in a school community.

Such shared leadership must actively engage teachers in decisions about learning and teaching. Of course, students, parents and the community are also stakeholders and should have an input to such decisions, but teachers, as educational professionals, must be in the front line in determining the nature and content of curriculum and the approaches to and processes of pedagogy, learning and teaching.

**Teachers as leaders**

The concept of teachers as leaders has been the subject of increasing research over recent years. In some contexts, it has been linked to the question of whether teaching has gained recognition and acceptance as a profession (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2001: 6). Other research has focused on the roles of teachers as leaders of teaching and learning and pastoral support. This is supported by the work of Darling-Hammond (1999), Hill (1993), and Crowther (2002a & 2002b), among others, who point to the central role of teachers in influencing students’ performances and outcomes in schooling.

Andrews, Crowther, Hann and McMaster (2002: 25) have developed a “Teachers As Leaders” framework which highlights the importance of two key factors focusing on the leadership of teachers, namely:

- the values base in the work of teachers who seek to elevate their schools and communities to enhanced outcomes and quality of life; and
- the power of teaching and teachers to create new meaning in the lives of people in schools and communities.

They defined the leadership of teachers as:

> ... behaviour that facilitates principled pedagogical action toward whole school success. It derives from the distinctive power of teaching to shape meaning for children, youth and adults. It contributes to enhanced quality of community life in the long term. (Andrews et al., 2002, p. 25)
They make an important distinction between teachers as leaders in a specialised area such as pedagogical and (subject) discipline leadership and leadership which contributes to whole school reform and improvement. This focus on school improvement was central to a recent Federal Government trial project of a shared leadership approach in schools in Australia (Chesterton & Duignan, 2004). The project, entitled the “IDEAS Project”, included a philosophy and framework based on the concept of ‘parallel leadership’ (Crowther et al. 2002a & 2002b), which encourages teachers to take on leadership responsibilities ‘in parallel’ with the principal and the executive, within a whole school improvement framework.

A key argument in such a shared approach to leadership is that leadership, in a school, needs to be widely distributed across key stakeholders. A number of researchers (e.g., Lashway, 2003; Pearce and Sims, 2002; Harris, 2002; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001; and Elmore, 2000) have explored the nature and structure of what they refer to as ‘distributed leadership’.

**Distributive leadership**

Pearce and Sims (2002) reported on a study that analysed the behaviour of appointed team leaders (vertical leadership) versus the distributed influence and effectiveness of those within the team (shared leadership). Distributed leadership, they concluded, accounted for much of the effectiveness of change management teams:

... this study examined an alternate social source of leadership, shared leadership, and found this alternate source of leadership to be quite useful in explaining the effectiveness of teams (p. 188)

The idea that shared and distributed leadership in schools is sourced within these social, material and cultural circumstances was discussed by Spillane et al. (2001) who concluded that:

...leadership involves the identification, acquisition, allocation, co-ordination, and use of the social, material and cultural resources necessary to establish the conditions for the possibility of teaching and learning.

They took leadership practice in schools as the unit of analysis, rather than an individual leader, and investigated how leadership is distributed between both positional and informal leaders. They explored how school leaders organise their practice around large-scale tasks (macro) as well as the more day-to-day functions (micro). In studying the relationship between these ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ tasks and functions,
Spillane et al. drew on the work of Little & Bird (1987) to argue that “...micro tasks, such as classroom observations and distinguishing formative and summative evaluation, can help realise the macro functions of supporting teacher development and monitoring instruction (Spillane et al. 2001: 24). They concluded by arguing that a distributed approach to leadership can lead to improved practice:

By making the ‘black box’ of leadership practice more transparent through the generation of rich knowledge about how leaders think and act to change instruction, a distributed perspective can help leaders identify dimensions of their practice, articulate relations among these dimensions, and think about changing their practice.

Elmore (2000), too, argued that leadership of schools is beyond the capacity of any one person and needs to be ‘distributed’ to incorporate the contours of expertise within a culture that provides coherence, guidance and direction for teaching, learning and instruction:

Distributed leadership, then, means multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organisation, made coherent through a common culture. It is the “glue” of a common task or goal – improvement of instruction – and a common frame of values for how to approach that task – culture – that keeps distributed leadership from becoming another version of loose coupling. (Elmore, 2000: 15)

Elmore (2000), cautioned, however, that collaborative work by teachers will not, alone, lead to changed teacher practices and improved learning outcomes. As with the ‘IDEAS Project’ referred to earlier, he believes that to engage teachers productively in leadership there must be a whole-school focus on change and improvement. He concluded that:

...participation in collaborative work increases commitment and satisfaction among teachers, but it is unlikely to result in changes in teachers’ practice, skill or knowledge in the absence of a clear organizational focus on those issues. (Elmore, 2000: 17).

Developing a new organisational model of distributed leadership requires, according to Elmore, two main tasks:

1. describing the ground rules which leaders of various kinds would have to follow in order to engage in large-scale improvement; and
2. describing how leaders of various kinds in various roles and positions would share responsibility in a system of large-scale improvement.
He listed five key principles underpinning his model of distributed leadership for whole-school improvement:

1. The purpose of leadership is the improvement of instructional practice and performance, regardless of the role;
2. Instructional improvement requires continuous learning;
3. Learning requires modeling;
4. The role and activities of leadership flow from the expertise required for learning and improvement; and
5. The exercise of authority requires reciprocity of accountability and capacity (Elmore, 2000, p 20-21).

Distributed leadership therefore, must have a clear purpose and focus engaging teachers as leaders based on their professional expertise, to bring about whole-school improvement in learning and teaching. In this way distributing leadership can be an important motivator and a contributor to the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom.

Harris (2002, p.2) concluded that leadership, especially distributed leadership, is a key determinant of the motivation of teachers and of the quality of teaching in the classroom. With respect to school improvement and change, she argued that there is an extensive body of research, which confirms that strong collegial relationships, mutual trust, support and a focus on enquiry are crucial for effective improvement:

*Collaboration is at the heart of distributed leadership, as it is premised upon change that is undertaken collectively. For distributed leadership to be most effective, it has to encompass mutual trust, support and enquiry. (Harris, 2002 p. 3)*

There is evidence to suggest that student outcomes are more likely to improve where leadership sources are distributed throughout the school and where teachers are empowered in decisions related to teaching, learning and assessment (Silins and Mulford 2002).

However, it would seem that distributed leadership is not easy to establish and maintain in practice and, consequently, is not a predominant characteristic of many contemporary schools. According to Harris (2002:7), there are some important reasons for this, especially those related to an emphasis on individualism and privacy in many school settings:
It [distributed leadership] challenges the ‘cult of individualism’ and confronts the impulse for privacy and idiosyncratic institutional practice. Instead, it offers a model in which organisational change and improvement are a collective rather than an individual concern (Harris, 2002 p. 7)

It seems reasonable, therefore, to conclude that in an educational context characterised by complexity, diversity and pressures on teachers and students for improved academic and social outcomes, a model of leadership focusing, primarily, on the principal is not desirable or sustainable. The challenge is to find ways of encouraging more teachers to become leaders and to provide them with the support and resources necessary to change current individualistic pedagogical and teaching and learning practices.

Crowther et al. (2002a) argue that a new paradigm of the teaching profession is needed, one that recognises both the capacity of the profession to provide desperately needed school revitalisation and the striking potential of teachers to provide new forms of leadership in schools and communities. A recent review of an Australian Federal Government trial of a shared, distributed model of leadership in schools (Chesterton and Duignan, 2004) identified the principal as a key to its success. The principal has to have the capacity or capability to share leadership, to ‘let go’ so that teachers can have their voices heard in key decisions on teaching and learning and on whole-school improvement. Principals with traditional views of position, power and hierarchical structures may find themselves unable to ‘unfreeze’ their habitual ways of thinking doing and organising. Duignan and Marks (2003) concluded that principals need to develop what they refer to as their ‘leadership capabilities’ if they are to feel comfortable in engaging fully with teachers in a shared leadership framework.

The National College for School Leadership (NCSL, 2006) (www.ncsl.org.uk/distributedleadership) in England, based on a substantial research agenda, proposed five pillars of distributed leadership in schools (the NCSL have very useful and practical research-based materials on distributed leadership). They describe these five pillars:

1. Self-confident and self-effacing headship – a desire to make an impact upon the world without a strong need for personal status;
2. Clarity of structure and accountability – defining responsibilities to create ‘permission to act’;
3. Investment in leadership capability – to build the value, beliefs and attributes of effective leadership in all members of staff;
4. A culture of trust – to facilitate boldness, debate and co-operation;
5. A turning point – specific actions and events in a school’s history that lend momentum to the evolution of distributed leadership (NCSL Booklet 3.1, Distributed Leadership, p. 22).
A key challenge in implementing a distributed approach to leadership seems to be to find ways of encouraging more teachers to become actively engaged in the leadership of their schools. Teachers need to be encouraged to become change agents themselves as well as leaders of pedagogy and curriculum.

**Teachers as change agents**

Fink (2003), reporting on research conducted in a secondary school in Ontario, Canada, explores the ‘unintended consequences’ of systemic change to a school, its teachers and principal. He argued that, at a time when teachers’ shortages and teacher morale are growing problems for many educational jurisdictions, the findings point to an urgent need to build better bridges of understanding between policy makers and policy implementers.

The unintended consequences of such policies and actions, Fink suggests, could be that more experienced teachers will look towards retirement and will not have the time or the motivation to mentor their younger inexperienced colleagues. Without mentoring, leadership and administrative support from over-worked principals and vice-principals, or help from downsized central offices, younger staff, who must carry reforms into the future, may become disillusioned and leave.

Dinham and Scott (2002), reported on research conducted in four countries (Australia, New Zealand, England and the United States of America – which employed a sample of more than 2600 teachers and school executives in more than 360 primary and secondary schools and was part of the International Teacher 2000 Project). This project sought to address the issue of how, in the context of rapid and continuing educational change, teachers and school executives in several countries feel about their work. The results indicated that certain sub-populations of teachers in each country may find themselves as the ‘pressure points’ in the systems, and perhaps are taking more of the brunt of educational change and societal pressures than others. These ‘pressure points’, they argue, may turn into ‘sticking points’ unless more attention is paid to the needs of teachers as agents, or ‘pressure-points’ for change. In educational systems and schools, there is a need to identify where change is being less well managed and where more needs to be done to support those concerned to meet their responsibilities and the expectations held for their positions. Dinham and Scott (2002) warned that there exists the possibility of a ‘paradox of educational change,’ whereby greater pressure for educational change impacting at one or more of these ‘sticking points’ could result in less change of a desired nature, but with more dysfunctional and unintended changes emerging in their place.
Fink (2003) and Dinham and Scott (2002) highlighted the fact that there are unintended consequences arising from large-scale, top-down educational change, and that teachers, who are the ones mostly responsible for its implementation, are most at risk from the unintended consequences, such as increased workloads and stress. Riley (2000), recognising the problems inherent in top-down or external change imposed on schools, recommended that governments need to move away from compliance models of educational reform towards an approach that reflects the aspirations of schools and communities, and which is supported by forms of leadership related to learning. Porter-O’Grady (1994) also argued that during times of concentrated change, compressed within short time frames, a new kind of leadership must emerge. Unfortunately, this kind of leadership is not frequently found in most organisations nor is it often valued in the work environment.

In times of great change, O’Grady argued all values are subject to review; ways of behaving and rules governing work require close scrutiny or evaluation; some structures and behaviours need to be scrapped or altered; and the organisation must be able to respond quickly to serendipity or opportunity. Porter-O’Grady argues that the fundamental role of leadership is to make it safe to risk and to stretch the boundaries of thinking and doing. Leaders create the milieu and provide the context for the emergence of the energy of collective creativity and innovation.

Collective change in schools, however, requires individuals, especially teachers, to change from ‘the inside out’ (Cashman 1998; Wildblood 1995; O’Toole 1995). All significant change begins with self-change. Leaders of educational change sometimes tend to focus too much on the change itself, which is external to the individual, and pay too little attention to the psychological transition of ‘the self’ that individuals go through in coping with or adapting to the change (Bridges 1998). Individuals and their psychological needs and concerns should be the primary focus in any change process, because as Pendlebury et al. (1998) contend, the greatest difficulties encountered during a process of change are those that arise inside people’s heads, which may lead to them resist the change.

These authors alert us to the importance of teachers as individuals, their anxieties, concerns, fears and frustrations with any change. Focus on these issues is essential in a change framework that encourages teachers to take on roles as leaders, for which they often have no prior experience or preparation. Leaders need to encourage teachers to name and discuss openly with their colleagues their personal fears and insecurities. (Forsha, 1995). They must also encourage, support and facilitate teachers to share the responsibilities for pedagogical and curriculum leadership in their school.
Of course, current school cultures will affect the degree to which changes are embraced by teachers. All those responsible for implementing educational change must study carefully and analyse the system or organisational culture into which the change is to be introduced. Schein (1992) reminded us that cultural understanding is essential for leaders if they are to lead effectively. He points out that leadership and culture are closely intertwined as leaders create cultures and culture in turn influences leaders and leadership. Schein concluded that the bottom line for leaders is that if they do not become conscious of and understand the cultures in which they work, those cultures will manage them.

Fullan (2001), also, argued that cultural change, which he refers to as ‘reculturing’, is essential for real change to occur. Policies and structures may change endlessly, but unless there is real and permanent cultural change, nothing will really have changed. Often, it is the thinking on which change programs are based which needs to be re-examined, (eg. the philosophy and assumptions), not in fact because it is wrong, but because it does not take account of the whole picture of people in organisations, i.e., the culture (Binney & Williams (1996).

The general acceptance of a major change, such as genuine shared or distributed leadership, may require considerable cultural change, especially amongst teachers, in many schools. There will need to be a new value set and vision that is lived on a daily basis. The imperatives of greater openness, trust and collaboration, as well as acceptance of sharing the responsibilities for leadership, to name but a few, require that ways of thinking and doing in these areas will have to change considerably, if not substantially, in many schools. Indeed, Fullan, is right when he argued that in many schools, a process of ‘reculturing’ will be necessary. Teachers can be very influential with their colleagues by taking ownership of and leading this reculturing processes.

**Concluding Statement**

At the end of the day, for any major change to work, special attention will need to be focused on teachers as leaders of learning improvement. Otherwise, there is a danger of what Sergiovanni (2000a) referred to as the dominance of technocracy over democracy as the value for selecting change strategies, thereby causing an overemphasis on process at the expense of substance and people. It will, also, not be sufficient to have only the rhetoric of teacher involvement and
empowerment; teachers will need to truly believe that they have a real say in pedagogical and curriculum reform in their local context.

Sergiovanni (2000b) argued that teachers are the key to school improvement. The more teachers know and the more skilled they are in teaching, the more successful schools will be in advancing learning. Whether teachers will know more and become more skilled, he suggested, depends on the support they get from policies and context. He pointed out that in many places, teaching is undervalued, and the conditions for supporting teachers are underdeveloped. This situation has consequences for the lifeworld of teachers and schools. Sergiovanni points out that the lifeworlds of teachers are fragile. When motivation is down and discretion is low, teachers’ sense of their own self esteem becomes blurred. Ultimately, he says, efficacy is affected and teacher efficacy is an important factor in building an effective school.

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