

Leading Educational Change

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In an ever changing world in education, school leaders need to unlock creativity to enhance student learning and this requires creative leadership to construct environments and opportunities for others to be creative. This paper will examine a very different approach to leadership that has been established to support Principal wellbeing, enhance community engagement and mobilise powerful teaching and learning in our school context. Supported by our sector a unique Co-Principal model began and it has captured the thinking and imaginations of many school leaders about how creative leadership has modelled creative thinking, has improved student outcomes and motivated teachers to think differently about why and how they teach.

The world is rapidly changing and there is an increasing need and desire for people to be interconnected and interdependent. The international influence cannot be ignored and school leaders are working in a context that requires them to enable interplay between the local, national and international environments. The core of this interplay for school leaders is to uphold the uniqueness of their own school community, the ethos, culture, history, vision and values.

Change is a word synonymous with education. Teachers will talk freely of the changes that have occurred over time and for many they accept these changes without feeling too much responsibility to adjust their practices accordingly. Teachers believe and in most cases do know what works and how children can learn best and they make the changing policies and procedures fit. This is not a criticism but a reality. I speak from my experience as a teacher in South Australia since 1987. I saw and taught through Attainment Levels, Statements and Profiles, South Australian Curriculum Standards Accountability Framework (SACSA) Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) National Curriculum and I attempted to stay true to what I believed was good pedagogy whilst still meeting the requirements of these policies and frameworks. I question if I engaged in change or maintained the very compelling state of status quo?

As a leader I view change through a different lense and with a different belief and responsibility. Change is not just adopting a new policy or framework it is about unlocking creativity to enhance student learning.

Much of this creativity will come from learning about what others do both here in Australia and in other countries. In times influenced by globalisation there seems no excuse to ignore national trends and world perspectives and to see, think and do things differently to improve student outcomes. "Globalisation does make new demands on education systems requiring a severe reform of the status quo" (Karen Mundy Globalization and Educational Change: New Policy Worlds)

The aspect of change I want to now consider is not just about what school leaders need to do to effect change in their schools but how school leadership can look different in itself. I have two reasons for exploring this. In 2014 I undertook a new leadership role that is very different from anything else that has or is occurring in Catholic schools in South Australia. This is linked to my second reason and that is about the wellbeing of school leaders and how with the demands of needing to be constantly aware of national and international trends and effecting change as a result of these there is great potential for

burn out and leaders staying with the status quo to try to reduce stress and overload. Tim Williams, education journalist for The Advertiser, the daily South Australian newspaper, recently reported on high work load and stress being reported by Principals through a survey commissioned by the South Australian Primary Principals Association (SAPPA). Association president Pam Kent commented that educational leaders need to be able to lead and improve learning and not be crippled with unrealistic administrative demands. The survey results indicated that principals rated their overall job performance higher than their capacity to cope with job related stress. This raises the concern that principals are putting up a strong front “but suppressing the need to look after their own wellbeing” Kent said. (Source News Limited)

So I project my thinking about globalisation and creative leadership into the context of my own leadership framework. It is thinking about the status quo of our current school leadership models that will give expression to my inquiry about the effectiveness and sustainability of a co-Principal model.

“The idea we are experiencing a crisis in leadership probably isn’t new, but I heard it in a new way.” Said Betty Sue. “If we are at the end of an era, I think a new kind of leadership is called for.” (Seashore 2009 p177)

The Context

St. Bernadette’s is a Reception to year 5 Catholic School in the South West Region of Adelaide. The current enrolment is 115 making it the smallest metropolitan Catholic School in South Australia. The school is situated in a low socio economic, semi industrial area close to one of Adelaide’s major public hospitals and it is situated on South Road which carries much of the road traffic from the southern suburbs towards the [Adelaide city centre](#)¹.

It is a diverse cohort of students made up of 27 cultures with Indian being the most dominant and 40% of the school are identified as having English as an additional language (EAL) St. Bernadette’s is a mainstream school with 20% of the school population having a diagnosed disability.

The Need for Change

The current Principal was appointed in 2006 and as it is such a small school it does not have the numbers to appoint a Deputy Principal. The other leadership position in the school is an Assistant Principal Religious Identity and Mission (APRIM) who has a 0.6 leadership role and as the title suggests the focus is on staff formation and Catholic Identity. Within the school there is a very small amount of resourcing for a key literacy teacher to work two days a week and this person is part of the school leadership team.

In the past 3 years the current principal has required leave to attend to family reasons and this leave was granted in varying forms from the Catholic Education Office (CEO). The school was in a constant state of change over this period of time as three different leaders were appointed to the acting positions. I am able to make comment about aspects of staff wellbeing during this time as I was visiting the school regularly as a Behaviour Consultant with the Catholic Education Office.

It was in conversation about staff wellbeing and student outcomes with the current principal I will call “A” that she identified that her frequent absences had impacted on the

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adelaide_city_centre

school and that she needed to create a model that was sustainable for a year to meet her needs and that of staff, students and parents as well as meeting the expectations at a sector level. Following consultation with the Principal Consultant, discussion with the leadership team and approval from the school board, the decision was made to create a co-principal model. I who I will call “C” was interested, applied and was successful in winning the position and then the conversation emerged about how the model would look at what was now ‘our school’.

The Process

Prior to applying for the position I did some research into models of co-Principalship and its effectiveness and found there was very little. There was also diversity in the interpretation of what a co-principal was and in some contexts it was two leaders that had previously been principal and deputy become equal co- principals to share responsibilities, focus expertise and fight burnout. (Mike Muir, 2005) Overall, models of co-Principalship were found to rely on personal compatibility, trust, and shared values about education, suggesting that implementation of such models should be voluntary and as needed on a case-by-case basis. (Anderson and Lacey 2009) The decision for co-principals at St. Bernadette’s was voluntary and due to the previous working relationship we had there was apparent compatibility and trust. Anderson and Lacey also commented that for the model to work potential co-principals should be involved in selecting their working partners or apply jointly for positions. In this case “A” was on the selection panel for her co-principal appointment.

With the structural part of the model in place (Appendix 2) the process began to establish roles, responsibilities, visions and values to jointly lead the school in financial and human resource management and leadership for learning. It quickly became evident that the model was somewhat of a paradox as the title of “Co” suggested shared and the common understanding of school principal is of a solo person and position. The work of Deal on Paradox Culture and Leadership provided clarity and direction for our deliberations and future directions.

Paradox of Purpose:

As co-principals we both agreed that we needed a shared purpose but within that we wanted our own creativity and diversity to be evident It was going to be a time of innovation and a time of challenge to ensure growth of staff and students. As confident and professional leaders we also wanted to stay true to our own style and approach and nurture diverse thinking.

Paradox of People:

We knew this change would be challenging for many staff and parents in the school community but that the children deserved a school leadership that enhanced their learning and created a culture of success and possibility for the students. We found very quickly that this was “one of leaderships deepest and most challenging paradoxes” (Deal et al pg 249) As leaders in a Catholic school we must protect the common good whilst facing the tension of individual rights. (Duignan 2012)

Paradox of Change:

When the school was operating in an effective way and student outcomes were generally good the cliché “if it's not broken don't fix it” came to my mind. However as leaders we are challenged to embrace change and find new ways to do things that have been done in schools for a long time. Another layer of challenge in the co-principal model is that school change comes with a layer of personal challenge for the existing principal in the partnership. We both wanted the best for the future but needed to preserve integrity and relationships.

Paradox of Action:

We immediately discovered the reality of taking action was often compromised by the perceived need for consultation and the time delays in a rotational leadership model. Action was sometimes delayed because staff or families waited to continue the conversation with a particular principal and our challenge into the future is to balance reflection and action to bring “possibilities to reality” (Deal 2009 p249)

I am embarking on another year as co-principal and this calls me to discover new opportunities and face new challenges. Again Deal provides a way to do this through the concept of opportunity. Moving forward we need to see opportunities.

Opportunity of Purpose:

In 2015 we will be developing a new school strategic plan and with all stakeholders, reviewing our vision and mission. Here is our opportunity to articulate and communicate our purpose that is focussed on student learning.

Opportunity of Place:

As a Catholic school we create special places as part of what we do so that the diverse community comes together in a valued and authentic way. We must look for opportunities to deepen this for the community but also invest in our staff so that our high quality purpose becomes theirs and we provide a space and place for them to grow as this “high quality purpose is the bedrock of success.” (Fullan 2006 p36)

Opportunity of People:

Moving forward and having built relationships with the broad school community it is vital that people remain as the central resource to what we do. As we further explore our ethos as part of our strategic planning it is essential that the ethos is understood to be organic and that it is cherished by individual staff members, responded to by individual students and valued by individual parents for it to be strong and vibrant.

Opportunity of Competence:

I need to continue to explore ways to be competent in aspects of leadership and engage with the competencies others bring to the learning space to reach high levels of achievement. I have witnessed the competency of my co-principal and through our combined yet different areas of expertise comes knowledge to be shared.

Opportunity of Commitment:

Modelling our commitment to the co-principal model has been relatively easy but we must seize opportunities to encourage the commitment of others.

Opportunity of Celebration:

We must find ways to communicate that we jointly celebrate the success and achievements in the school whilst staying true to the rigour of the model.

Opportunity of Caring:

Again we are blessed in Catholic schools that care is one of the Gospel values that lives in our community.

Finally reflecting on how these opportunities will shape our co principalship in the future, our challenge is to “learn from history what we can and leave behind what we must.” (Hargraves 2006 p41)

Do I believe that the Co principal model is effective? Yes as staff wellbeing surveys and interviews conducted by the Work Health and Safety coordinator at the school provided qualitative and quantitative data to suggest greater staff wellbeing. There has been a reduction in staff absentee and an increase in staff willingness to be involved in extra curricula activities.

The students were also surveyed on the co principal model and their responses were 100% positive. Of course the validity of this is uncertain due to the age range being 5 -13 years and a lack of willingness to be critical of the school principal however one response suggested that all schools should have two principals “ because if one is tired the other can do the work.” (Student aged 6 response)

The challenge is to be a strong authentic leader with integrity and with vision and direction that can create a path to the future for staff and students in the school.

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