

# Thinking About Principals

David Stewart

## The crucial role of the principal

**It is the principal who binds together the various threads of “values, leadership, vision and culture” (Campbell-Evans, 1993:110).**

For most school communities there are competing goals, a wide spectrum of expectations, and a range of values that register almost all the possible points of view. The principal, in an effective school, acts as a filter and conduit for establishing the “core” values that the school will honour. Dimmock (1993) argues that we are yet to identify the variables that will allow us to identify which principals made a difference to student learning, and why this might be so. He states that, “some do [make a difference] but most do not”(ibid:41).

The differences between those principals who do make a difference and those who don't, can often be explained by examining the way that they think, but even then "quite effective forms of principal practice are reported to have largely indirect effects on students" (Biesset et al 1982; Heck 1990; Leithwood and Montgomery 1986; Pitner 1988 as cited in Dimmock 1993:42). The major difficulty is that we just do not know what the intervening variables are but there is much evidence to support the concept of school culture in both its content and its application as being a most important factor. (Little 1982; Mortimer et al 1988) Those principals who are perceived to be effective may be those who by their actions shape and transform the culture to best encourage teaching and learning (Deal and Peterson 1991; Firestone and Wilson, 1985; Hargreaves 1990; Leithwood and Jantzi 1990). Nevertheless, "leadership remains as Burns (1978) suggested, one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth" (Campbell-Evans 1993:99).

It is clear that the contradictions in public expectations are a key challenge for principals. Those who successfully deal with this uncertainty are those who are able to manage the culture (Campbell-Evans, 1993). Greenfield (1989) supported this reasoning when he described school administrators as “value carriers”. Whether or not principals can be directly connected to student learning may be still unproven but there is a strong association between effective principalship and a school culture which supports learning. Fullan (1991:169), argues that “Serious reform... is changing the culture and structure of the school” and that this will not get done without the active involvement of the principal. By reform he is implying an improvement in teaching and learning. This view is supported by Sebring, et al (1995:68) who describes the principal as “the single most important actor in promoting reform at the building level.”

As principals from hour to hour decide on what to do next, the critical question that should be uppermost in their minds is - to what extent will this present work impact on teaching and learning? The answer should provide the relative importance and therefore the rank of the task in the immediate schedule of things to be done.

## **We change what teachers do by changing the way they think about what they do.**

The way that we think about what we do has a major effect on what we actually do. If we think about schools as organisations, for example, we tend to consider those aspects of organisations which can be controlled. Clearly, we would wish to exercise some *control* over what students may do in order to encourage active learning and this would seem to reflect what schools are about, but *controlling* what teachers do raises a number of ethical issues. Teachers need to be accountable but the means by which accountability is achieved is important, both to the individual and to the overarching culture of the school.

If schools are perceived as communities, albeit special kinds of communities which are established for the prime purpose of inculcating learning, we tend to think of the values that tie the community together, rather than how it may be controlled, and it becomes important to understand the beliefs that various members hold and to what extent there are shared understandings, and shared practices. Communities are driven from the centre, from this common core culture, whereas organisations can be treated as if their rules are inviolate. Sergiovanni, (1991) uses these ideas in his discussion of transactional and transformational leadership. The school as an organisation would emphasis transactional modes of interaction where services are performed and rewards and remuneration received, and the school as a community would value transformational associations where the group as a whole was committed to an ideal.

Sergiovanni (1992:41-45) succinctly draws the distinction between the two: in a transactional culture “what gets rewarded gets done” while in a transformational culture “what is rewarding gets done”. As the name suggests, a transactional culture is based around expectations of exchange and reward. Members belong to an organisation because the rewards they receive equal or exceed the investment of time and effort they are called upon to make. In such organisations managers obtain compliance from members by offering an appropriate mix of economic, political or psychological incentives. This style of leadership works best when both leaders and followers understand and agree on the key tasks to be performed. The leader’s task is to keep members working on task by rewarding high performance and sanctioning poor performance.

In a transformational culture, on the other hand, members are committed to the mission of the organisation and work to achieve those objectives. What we believe in, think to be good, and feel obligated to do gets done. Transformational leadership arises when leaders are more concerned about gaining general commitment and participation from institutional members than they are about getting particular tasks done. Sergiovanni (1996:14) associates transformational leadership with “compacts and commitment” and transactional leadership with “treaties and contracts”.

The concept of transformational leadership has evolved from a particular eclectic blend of ideas illustrated by Mary Poplin (1992:11).

Deci and Ryan (1988) tell us we are motivated through a sense of competence, control, and connection. Learning theory tells us that we grow as we extend knowledge by experimenting and creating new meanings. Critical theory suggests we can advance community growth by promoting critical dialogue. Feminist theory suggests that growth happens in conjunction with others to whom we feel connected and for whom we care.

The common theme in all these theoretical positions is the belief that success in leadership and in promoting dynamic schools is a consequence of a particular form of school culture. That school culture is characterised by perceptions of community as opposed to ideas of organisation (Mitchell and Tucker, 1992:32). In formal organisations where people are confirmed in roles through policy and rules, job function tends to follow these divisions. It is what Sergiovanni (1996:10-12) calls “separation of function by role.” It has always been difficult to think about teaching in this way as the teaching act embodies elements of both deciding what to do and how to do it.

The thing about teaching is that the specificity of the context is always central. We can't get away with invoking rules and procedures that cut across contexts. Giroux(1992:17)

When the concept of critical reflection and the importance of an “emotionally sustaining “ peer group is added, Brookfield (1995:244) argues that the term “learning community” more accurately expresses the reality than other possible terms such as “network”. The use of the concept “organisation” suffers also from similar inappropriate perceived meanings. Prawat (1993:16) goes on to say in further differentiating communities from organisations, “The goal of learning communities is to build social and intellectual connections among people and control interferes with this process.”

## **A School Development Approach**

The approach, entitled “School Development”, aims to begin with a focus on principal development and the acquisition, by the principal, of the ability to be critically reflective. A move focussed on a greater understanding of the school culture is facilitated by the adoption of a preference for systematic data gathering and critique. Increasingly, staff are also encouraged to analyse the key processes within the school and make overt the prevailing values, and norms of its population. As a consequence, change and school renewal is likely to be constant and steady and incorporate existing effective practice. The culture of learning is widened to include all members of the school who increasingly perceive themselves as members of a community.

Implicit within this definition is the belief that such an effort must be collaborative and must deal with both real and perceived problems. Schools are viewed as unique cultural systems capable of self improvement through applying behavioural science techniques in reflective self-analytic ways. As such school development has to do with growth and effectiveness between and amongst the people in the school community.

## **The Concept of Community**

The kind of community advocated here is democratic community. As in any community people still fulfil multiple roles but all will have a right to be heard, all will have a measure of control and responsibility for their own actions, and all will have a commitment to the health and well-being of the whole community. It is within this concept of community that trust, optimism, and shared delight exist. There will be some members of the community who, from time to time, upset and dismay their neighbours. Some will need to be sanctioned and in extreme cases some may be asked to leave the community. These are exceptional events and will be treated as such. Communities do not function well if they are designed to deal with exceptional behaviours as the norm. Communities function well when there is a substantial consensus about what should be done and when groups within the community regularly ask questions about 'what is' and 'what might be'. Strong communities welcome debate and the sharing of disparate views. Strong communities have multiple ways of reaching the same goals.

Community members welcome the skills, knowledge and inter-dependence of each other and work as a group to achieve the best for all. Principals, therefore, are both leaders and participating community members. One of their prime functions is to continually interpret actions in the light of the core culture that the community has established. School communities exist mainly in the heads of the members and these thoughts need to be shared with each other, regularly, in order to retain their consistency and relevance. Once again principals act as both facilitator and gatekeeper for these conversations and narratives to take place. Within the school, regular conversations about teaching and learning sustain and extend teaching methodology. Principals, in turn, need similar opportunities to talk with colleagues who share similar challenges and dilemmas.

## **Establishment of a learning community**

When discussing change and restructuring in the Chicago school system, Bryk et al (1994), considered that schools could be ordered into four groups. The "environmental order schools" focused on safety, security, discipline and attendance issues. A second group were engaged in "peripheral academic change" but had no overall plan or sense of direction, and a third group were called "Christmas tree schools", as they selected initiatives which "looked good" but which were not necessarily connected to student learning. Only the fourth group, "emergent restructuring schools", seemed to have a major chance of completing successful change. They were characterised by a "professional community" and "a sense of purpose" (ibid:76). It is this concept of community which brings together a number of threads in this work.

In defining their concept of school community, Sebring et al (1995:5) listed five features which created a professional community for teachers.

- regular opportunities for reflective dialogue;
- opportunities to visit colleagues, discuss their teaching and jointly solve problems;
- collaborate in teaching activities;
- work in a culture of shared values and beliefs rather than one based on rules and requirements; and
- focus main energy on student learning.

Furthermore, these researchers wrote that, “the positive effects of a professional community are unlikely to be realised in an individual school unless practices are normative, i.e., most of the teachers engage in them most of the time”(ibid:5). To get to this point it was likely that the schools would need some outside assistance (ibid p 8). This study provides some understanding of the kind and range of the outside assistance that can be applied to schools within New Zealand.

Charles Payne, in a commentary to Sebring et al (1995:70), argued that a commitment to peer collaboration in many schools was likely to generate conflict which may be beyond the capacity of that school to handle. He argues, “the professional community model may require a thresh-hold level of professional skill which may not exist in all schools.” Fullan, (in Sergiovanni 1996:2) also agrees that the “reculturing” of a school precedes successful restructuring rather than vice versa. In the four phase taxonomy (Stewart, 2000), structural change was always preceded by an examination of present practices and a period of time for further developing collaborative interactions.

“High Performance Theory” (Sergiovanni 1996:11), which can be seen to be operating in many of the recent New Zealand organisational changes, as data collection to substantiate continuous improvement becomes the norm, can be seen as a move away from the concept of a learning community. Planning is separated from the doing in what Sergiovanni (1996:12) calls a “separation of function by roles” and, as a consequence, teachers lose the ability to respond reflectively. Schools become “professional communities” when “members of the community are critically dependant on each other” (Brown 1994).

Whereas organisations have purposes which are interpreted and enacted by their leaders, “communities are defined by their centres... Centres govern the school values and provide norms that guide behaviours and give meaning to school community life” (Sergiovanni, 1996:2:41).

## **Principals’ responsibilities**

There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the principal’s job has intensified along with that of teachers (Apple 1988, Apple and Juizck 1991, Chicago School Reform 1994). Some would argue that there has been a greater intensification of work in these positions, to the extent that turn over of principals and the consequential short tenure of individuals may endanger the whole change strategy (Chicago School Reform 1994:78). In the change to a more inclusive form of learning it is the principal who plays the key role in interpreting the values, the way common understanding will be applied, and how the

culture will be extended (Campbell-Evans 1993). The major responsibility, to make learning the dominant characteristic of the institution, rests firmly on principals' shoulders. Although most school work takes place in classrooms and principals can be held responsible for these interactions, Fullan (1991:161) argues that "there is a limit to how much time principals can spend in individual classrooms. The larger goal is in transforming the culture of the school."

Principals have a responsibility to ensure that learning and teaching functions effectively, and that members of the school community gain satisfaction from these activities. How they do this may have more to do with developing a commitment to a range of agreed core culture elements, than developing managerial and supervisory systems which mimic the commercial world (Sergiovanni 1996).

    Serious reform... is changing the culture and structure of the school... if the principal does not lead changes to the culture of the school, or if he or she leaves it to others, it normally will not get done. That is the improvement will not happen. (Fullan 1991:169)

If we seriously believe that learning is the active construction of knowledge by individuals, then we will not be satisfied with any school goal which emphasises mere knowledge acquisition. We will want to establish conditions which encourage pupils and teachers to challenge old conceptions and learn from new experiences. It is the process of reflection and learning that we will be focusing on, rather than merely the outcome in terms of knowledge acquired. The principal's main objective should be to foster that climate of active reflection and learning throughout the whole school community. This objective certainly extends beyond the student body. Teachers too need to be reflecting on what they are doing and the effects of their actions. Parents and board members need to be brought into this net of learning and reflection too. They cannot rely on outside solutions and yesterday's solutions any more than students or teachers can.

It is the interaction of all the individuals, sharing their perceptions and "interests" and "narratives" that enables the construction of a school community. Such a concept is, or can be dynamic and constantly changing.

## **In Summary**

What seems to be emerging for the principal, in some school systems, is more of a "mediation" role in place of a "controlling" function, (Sparkes and Bloomer, 1993), although there are many mandated tasks, such as performance appraisal for example, which would mitigate this view. Principals face multiple competing demands for their time and their attention. For many there is the dilemma of administrative work versus visits to classroom and involvement in the teaching programme. Some writers suggest that principals should recognise that there is a finite limit to the amount of time that they can spend within classrooms. Their major focus should be instead "in transforming the culture of the school" (Fullan 1991:161). The assumption here is that such a focus will in turn influence teachers to transform the culture of their classrooms. Here the "mediation" role of the principal would enable "best" and most effective practice to be spread amongst the faculty. Teachers would influence each other in a positive direction, with the understanding and consent of the principal rather than the principal being responsible for influencing each teacher directly, even if this was possible.

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