

Principal Professional Learning as part of the School Development Process by David Stewart

Successful school development is a process that begins by the principal making a commitment to engaging in critical reflective thought. This is often achieved by regular focus meetings with a small group of trusted colleagues. Becoming reflective is then fostered through principal extension opportunities that have a long-term school development activity as an integral component. Such activity gains momentum and depth when it is connected with a tertiary institution through seminars, graduate programmes, and university-led development initiatives. These endeavours may progress and incorporate models such as:

- **principal as researcher** where the leader participates in the data gathering and analysis;
- **principal as mentor** where a leader facilitates a small group of other principals engaged in similar school development initiatives;
- **principal as developer of culture** where consensual core values, beliefs and understandings are achieved; and
- **principal as community leader** where a learning community is fostered and maintained.

They are likely to be associated with certain key processes such as Quality Learning Circles, Conceptual Job Descriptions and a Four Phase Development Model.

Both the induction of the principal into forms of reflective thought and action, and the parallel school development activity, are contingent on an educational rather than managerial stance. Emerging skill and understanding, for example, are based around an analysis of 'craft knowledge' and an understanding of school culture through narrative and data gathering. These processes emphasise collaboration and professional conversations and celebrate innovation and difference. A managerial approach mandates a range of specific, predetermined actions that can be monitored and that have been devised centrally. The context of the specific school where the principal works is largely ignored. Sergiovanni (1996), for example, rejects the three kinds of theories designed for the business and managerial world, which he classifies as the *Pyramid Theory*, designed to produce "standardised products in uniform ways," the *Railroad Theory* for "predictability and determination," and *High Performance Theory* where in schools "ends are considered to be measurable learning outcomes," in favour of a concept of "learning community." In the "learning community," an educative perspective is adopted, as the goal "is to build social and intellectual connections among people and control interferes with this process" (Prawat, 1993, cited in Sergiovanni, 1996:16).

Principal and school development activities of this nature are sustained over time through professional groups which are committed to critical reflective dialogue based around the school development activities in which they are presently engaged. Leaders, mentors, and facilitators of these

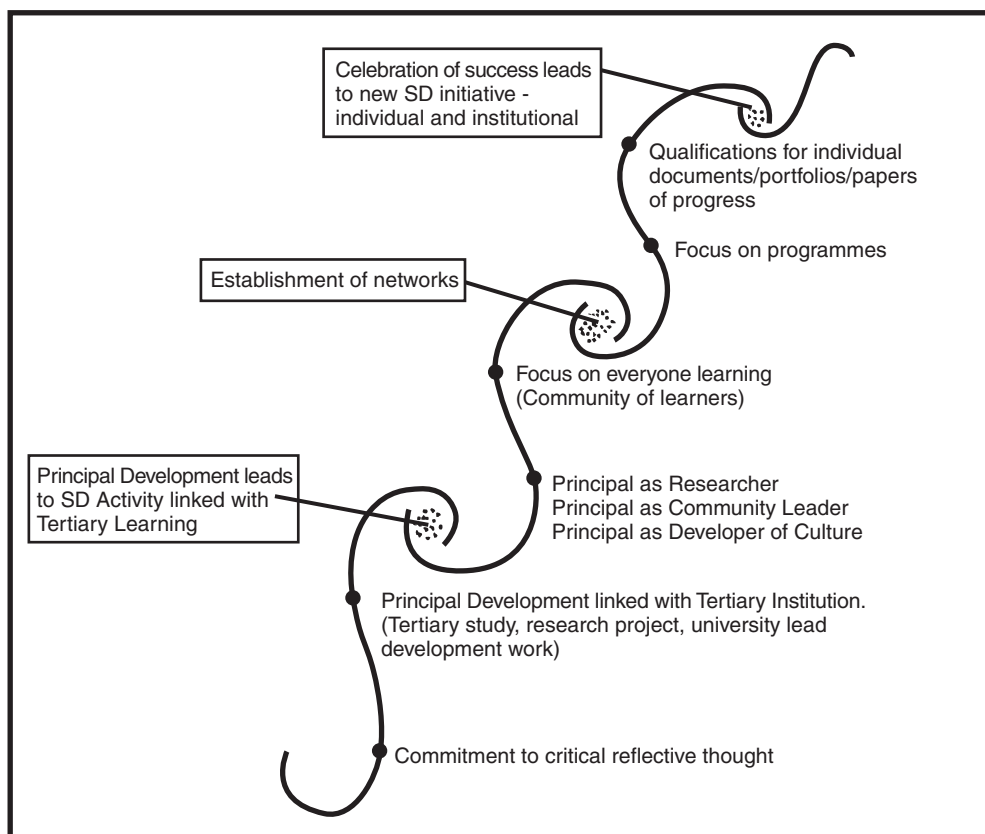
groups function more effectively if they are networked to others and include tertiary teachers and researchers in the discussion loop. Networks, such as these, can function for some of the time via electronic media such as audio-graphic conferencing.

Where school development activities enable individuals to complete additional qualifications that enhance their personal professional careers, the process is intensified. Success is then defined in both individual and institutional terms. Celebration of this dual success energises a further round of school development activity and may widen the circle of participants, within the school, who wish to link their individual educational career options with further whole of school activity.

The three critical points in this kind of development are:

- when the personal professional education, probably connected with a tertiary institution, links with a planned school development activity;
- when networks of schools following similar processes are formed, and the group facilitators are connected to tertiary programme providers; and
- when school-wide celebration occurs, incorporating individual and institutional success as a platform for the next school development activity.

These critical points and the intervening activities are represented in the diagram below.



Sigmoid Curve representing a school development theory

The School Development theory expressed above does not extend to include every activity that school leaders might be engaged in. Accounting procedures, employment law, fundraising, property management and staff appointments, to name a few, are vital knowledge areas which fall outside this schema but are a necessary part of principal education. Traditional, withdrawal seminars, published guide books, and established support agencies provide the means of acquiring the appropriate information and resolving emerging problems in these areas. School Development, as defined in this book, pertains directly to the learning and teaching within the school.

The chain of activity is developed as a sigmoid curve to acknowledge that what happens in schools is non-linear and yet contains a number of critical points, shown at the intersection of the curves, which are fundamental to continued growth. The open-ended notion signifies the need for energy to be created, as in celebration, to sustain and further develop a culture of learning community within the institution. School Development, in this context, is not a contracted commitment to a finite year long programme, although it may begin that way, but rather a mode of constantly thinking, talking and reading about improving the match between teaching and learning. Sustained learning and learning exchange is facilitated through professional dialogue. Career development, tenure, intellectual challenge and job satisfaction are an integral part of the school development process.

References

Sergiovanni, T.J. (1996) *Leadership for the Schoolhouse: How is it Different? Why is it Important?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Prawat, R.S. (1993) The role of the principal in the development of learning communities. *Wingspan: The Pedamorphosis Communique*, 9 (2), 7-9.

This extract is taken from Chapter 9: A Theory of School Development (pp255—258) of David Stewart's book *Tomorrow's Principals Today* (2000) Massey University: Kanuka Grove Press. The book is available from Kanuka Grove – Teacher Resource Centre: kanuka.grove@massey.ac.nz