Principal's Sabbatical Report 2008

Focus: Distributed Leadership; developing the leadership of others as a means to sustaining future schooling

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Executive Summary
All current school reform efforts aim to improve teaching and learning. But there are huge differences in how they go about it. However, they all depend for their success on the motivations and capacities of local leadership and effective or successful leadership is critical to any school reform.

Distributed leadership offers a framework for thinking about leadership differently. There is substantial overlap with other well-developed, longstanding conceptions of leadership such as 'shared,' 'instructional,' 'participative,' 'transformational,' and so on.

Promising efforts have begun to extend the concept of distributed leadership beyond its commonsense uses and provide evidence about its nature and effects (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006; Leithwood et al, 2004). These efforts suggest, for example, that it is helpful for some leadership functions to be performed at every level in the school. The practice of leadership should be a central focus stimulating others to think differently about their work, their interactions, routines and tools and not confined to just thinking about leadership in terms of formal positions of authority retaining responsibilities.

The challenge for leaders in schools is how to manage the immediate running of the school and the demands of the current year while at the same time building longer-term capacity. Building an infrastructure that will give attention to thinking in terms of process not just plans and the way leaders involve others may be more important than the documents they write. Having a passion for continued improvement and development, developing personal humility and professional will as a means of building long-term leadership capacity, building capacity and creating involvement,

developing strategic measures of success, practising strategic timing and strategic abandonment will enable a school to build strong leadership practices and capacity for the long-term.

Sustaining effectiveness is possible because of the many levels of support available in and to the school. Support and encouragement are crucial to all the factors already mentioned that underpin effective sustainability. Sustaining the energy, commitment and enthusiasm of school leaders goes hand in hand with improving their capacities.

Purpose

The purpose of the sabbatical was to investigate and have the opportunity to reflect on theories associated with the '*Distributed Leadership*' and observe models in action that develop leadership in others. Specifically:

- What are the leadership practices that educational leaders need to know about that influence teaching quality and how that promotes learning?
- How can the distributed leadership model be effectively achieved and its effectiveness sustained?
- How will the distributed leadership model be the vehicle to drive school-wide pedagogy, the professional learning programme, teaching and learning effectiveness?

Background

Glendowie College has been involved in the MoE supported ICT Cluster Project for almost three years. The project has been the catalyst for change and has been the vehicle to driving a whole-school approach to improving pedagogy, teaching and learning effectiveness and at the same time building professional learning communities.

The sabbatical focus also aligns itself with issues important to the college and the school's strategic plan in the following areas:
- Expanding the collaborative environment model already embedded in the college;
- Giving emphasis to its professional learning programme and its whole-school approach to pedagogy; and
- The continuation of building leadership capacity at every level.

The Senior Leadership Team has given attention to building their own leadership capacity through planned professional learning opportunities over the past three years in collaboration with several educational leaders in a variety of settings. However, one educational consultant in particular has worked very closely with our team, facilitating and supporting us in our own learning. I have every respect for this consultant and researcher, the person and the professional. This is a sentiment shared by our entire team.

For the team this has resulted in greater leadership effectiveness when managing the day-to-day interactions of staff, students and the community. It has enabled each member of the team to improve their own practices associated with building

leadership capacity as well as developing the leadership capacity of others. There has been a greater consistency within the team when determining who communicates with whom, who shares professional wisdom with whom, and who ultimately influences the quality of teaching and learning. The learning for us has been very rich.

The college is now in a strong position to continue expanding the distributed leadership model to exercise other dimensions that will build teacher and student leadership.

For sustainability, school improvement will depend more than ever on the active involvement of teacher leaders. There is considerable opportunity for middle-managers to stretch leadership practice over teacher leaders and pause for thinking about leadership differently. The distributed model is much more than thinking about positional authority, titles and management tasks, it is about sharing and collaborating with others to improve effectiveness. Leadership practice can make a difference to student outcomes and is reliant on the participation of many people, senior and middle-managers especially to encourage every adult in the school to have the necessary interactions with others that will ultimately contribute to developing the leadership mix.

It is possible to have multiple leaders and leadership practice is constructed in the interactions between leaders, followers and others that support schools. This all contributes towards building sustainable learning.

Activities Undertaken

There were a number of activities undertaken to explore this focus area of distributed leadership and practices relating to it. Specifically:

- Attendance at the 21st International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, Auckland, January 2008
- Professional discussions on leadership with members of the University of Auckland, Faculty of Education; An Education Consultant and Researcher; The Superintendent of Schools Instructional Services for the Saanichton District, BC; The York Region District School Board, Toronto; The Centre for Leadership and Learning, York Region School Board, Toronto; The Wallace Foundation, New York, Support Centre for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) and Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISEUT) and the University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education.

- Visits to the following Schools:
  Saanichton District, British Columbia, Canada
  Claremont Secondary School
  South Island Distance Education School (SIDES)
  Individual Learning Centre

  York District, Toronto, Canada
  Maple High School

Huron Heights Secondary School
Stoufville High School

United Kingdom
Sir John Lawes School, Harpenden, Hertfordshire
Birchwood High School, Bishop Stortford, Hertfordshire
Sir Joseph Williamsons Mathematical School, Rochester, Kent

- There was sufficient time to reflect on a number of professional readings.

Findings
The nature of leadership is changing. Schools visited in Canada and the UK are involved in making innovative changes to their structures and processes to support and develop teacher leadership. Common to all schools was the shared thinking that the professional development and learning of teachers as leaders is critical to continued innovation, change and sustainability.

Across the schools visited teachers who are leaders were leading learning in productive and pedagogic ways. They were engaging in the use of new technologies in their teaching and were understanding of the importance of the relationship between teachers and students (and their families). There was evidence of promoting 'best practice' and using mentoring and coaching to support their learning and that of others.

My observations saw teachers who are leaders involved in influencing and working with others in a highly collaborative, collegial and supportive environments. Collaboration and collegiality were considered integral components of teachers' professional lives and work and several of the schools had developed a school culture that recognised and valued the contribution of all individuals. Also evident were high levels of trust, autonomy and respect for teachers' professionalism.

There was a strong commitment by teachers in all the schools to contribute to professional teams or clusters. Each school visited had created opportunities that enabled teachers to lead and share teaching and learning reflections, teaching strategies and their own professional practice. It was found that professional relationships and commitments helped to foster instructional innovation and initiatives that complemented such teacher-led innovations. They all viewed the alignment of curriculum, teaching and learning strategies, assessment and reporting of major importance to teacher leaders and found ways to collaborate to implement innovative curriculum programmes and to share best practice.

The professional learning programmes were central to driving school-wide pedagogy and teaching and learning effectiveness. The schools were at different places in terms of their journey.

Each school found their own niches to do this. Examples included spending time in the classrooms of others, opportunities to talk, watch and listen to others, being a resource provider, participation in learning lunches, reading groups, leadership development seminars for the staff to attend, mobile classroom opportunities, cross-

curricular group meetings, opportunities to be an instructional specialist or curriculum specialist, being a classroom supporter, a learning facilitator, serving as a mentor for novice teachers, mentors as role models, leading activities at workshops, conferences and/or seminars as well as professional learning sessions, professional reading, role modelling and observing in the 'open classroom.'   There was also evidence of sharing and celebrating success and listening to success stories. Keeping teachers fed and well watered during the professional learning programme was routine practice in all the schools I saw.

A very impressive model in action was that of The Leading for Learning (LfL), HertsCam Network project which has enabled experienced teachers to work in partnership with the University of Cambridge staff to engage in building teacher leadership through Teacher Led Development Work groups. The role of the facilitator from Cambridge University was integral to setting the framework for the teacher-led discussions taking place. Probing questions were asked to take the discussion to a further deeper level for reflection. This gave the discussions added rigour to the work of the group. The teachers contribute freely with their stories.

There was a shared view that teachers who lead build a sense of community in their schools and contribute greatly to the learning culture. They seek to strengthen the teaching community through sharing and collaborating and they also strengthen the quality of leadership in the school through their active involvement. Teacher leaders are also instrumental in building relationships with the wider school community and beyond. All schools were engaged in building professional learning communities beyond their own school. There was a shared view that principals and teachers needed to develop their own professional learning communities to a certain point first, before they reached out in a more proactive way to the community. The collaboration and sharing had extended to wider school in some shape or form through the construction of various networks.

Improving effectiveness is an essential part of teacher leadership. In my discussions with groups of teachers there was a strong awareness that effectiveness could also be improved at a personal level and all agreed that this was not always easy to achieve. At a school-wide level, it was best achieved through better planning, organisational, and communication strategies.

Schools in both Canada and the UK are beginning to involve students' more in decisions and choices about learning, learning activities and assessment. Clearly, learning was placed at the centre of all activities and was encouraging of risk and innovation. This was offering schools pathways for reviewing and strengthening their practices as a learning community that was inclusive of student leadership at the decision-making level.

One such innovation that caught my attention was an experiment conducted by a science teacher that saw identified students taking complete responsibility for the teaching of a module of work in the classroom. The student-led lessons had a number of benefits not only for the students who were exercising influence over each other in ways that teachers could not but also for the teacher (who became an observer during the experiment) and who learned about new teaching techniques from the lessons the students planned and taught. The students were well supported by the teacher prior to

the experiment taking place, included preparation meetings, rehearsal and practical demonstrations of the science lesson to take place.

Other examples from the schools visited included student involvement when making staff appointments, giving council reports to the Senior Leadership Team, raising individual student profiles, an instructional leadership opportunity that develops students as observers of lessons and with a teacher observer have a conversation about the lesson that has taken place and eventually the conversation will include the teacher, student voice opportunities to gauge how students felt about a lesson, a student-led leadership conference, students coming to observe a BOT meeting, and considering student involvement in professional learning activities.

Each school had school structures in place to promote student leadership opportunities such as those offered by many New Zealand schools. Some others for consideration included The Peace Club, Executive Steering Committee for the Student Council, consisting of students from all levels, Peer Helpers (not Peer Support) for academic work, Student Character Matters Leadership Team and Best Buddies especially for new students to the school or students with special needs.

The York District, Toronto had worked on a character initiative bringing education and the community together known as the character community initiative. One community made significant strides in bringing character to the forefront of daily living. The character attributes agreed on by the community were very explicit as soon as you entered the front door to each school and district office in the York District. A model using distributed leadership across an entire community.

Implications
Not every school is hospitable to the emergence of teacher leaders, particularly teacher leaders who do not hold titles or positions of authority. The school leader plays a crucial role in fostering the conditions that facilitate teacher leadership including ensuring a safe environment for risk taking is present.

Sometimes the teachers themselves resist taking on leadership roles, or make it difficult for their colleagues to do so (tall poppy syndrome). The school leader therefore needs to create a culture that gives emphasis to teachers who step outside their traditional roles and take on leadership projects.

The development of teacher leadership roles in the school should be done so in a planned way and the challenge is to balance teacher interest and school need.

The amount of support provided by the school's administration, the staff, students and/or parents can be challenging especially in terms of time.

Teacher leadership capabilities also impact upon the level of success. Capabilities such as being well-organised in terms of management and co-ordination of the activity; having high energy levels; having a well-developed sense of humour; being able to generate support and enthusiasm; being committed to the project; being able to communicate with a range of personnel; having well-developed listening skills, able to encourage feedback and generate suggestions for improvement; being an ideas

person – able to think creatively; able to get the task done; showing resilience and remaining positive in spite of negative criticism or the lack of support and being a credible person in the school community.

Leading learning implications can include the range of extra-curricula activities on offer at the school, and the number of school programmes and committees.

Sharing and collaboration challenges can be caused by waning creativity, a lack of enthusiasm, and the lack of time or money.

Building a sense of community can be challenged by growing staff negativity and the unwillingness of teachers to get involved.

Improving effectiveness can also be challenged by the growing divide between a school's leadership team and its teachers, the intensification of teachers' work, increased accountability, a failure to accept new initiatives, the lack of resources committed to an initiative, and increases in student behaviour problems in the teacher's classroom.

Conclusion

The unprecedented demands being placed on principalship and the modern school today are challenging to meet and now require thinking about leadership differently and stretching this to occur at every level, inclusive of teacher and student leadership.

By understanding teacher leadership and helping teachers develop the skills required to act as leaders, we will improve schools and help teachers realise their full potential, (Fullan, M, 2007). School leaders must be proactive in helping teachers acquire the skills they need to take advantage of opportunities for leadership.

If teacher leaders are to emerge and make their full contribution, they need opportunities to learn the necessary skills of curriculum planning, instructional improvement, assessment design, collaboration, and facilitation. Teachers can learn these skills through opportunities provided through school level professional learning and development programmes; build these skills through support provided from both in the school or at association, university-based courses and seminars and conferences. Whatever the source, the opportunities must be available and sufficiently convenient for teachers to take advantage of them.

A school leader models to teacher leaders how to get value from being involved in such ways as serving on a committee, acting in roles of chair, supporting school initiatives, representing the school on community or regional task forces or committees. A school leader shares the vision of the school, aligns his or her professional goals with those of the school, and shares responsibility for the success of the school as a whole.

Almost the most important roles teacher leaders assume is that of learner. Learners model continual improvement, demonstrate lifelong learning, and use what they learn to help all students achieve.

Teacher leaders shape the culture of their schools, improve student learning, and influence practice among their peers regardless of whether their roles are formal with designated responsibilities or more informal roles as teachers interacting with their peers. Nevertheless, they build the entire school's capacity to improve and can contribute to the schools' success.

A distributed perspective on leadership provides a lens for generating insights into how leadership is practiced, helping school leaders and practitioners think about and approach their work in new ways. There are several suggestions in this report of examples of what leadership practices could be used to develop teacher and student leaders. It is these collective practices that inform the school professional learning programme driving greater teaching and learning effectiveness.

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