



Unpacking the Effective School Leader

Tina Doe, Editor, IJICC, Australia, **Paul Fradale**, Aoba International School, Japan, **David Lynch**, Southern Cross University, Australia, **Shane Mason**, Education Queensland, **Cathy Quinn**, Education Consultant, Australia, **and Ken Sell**, Aoba International School, Japan.

So, what constitutes effective school leadership? In this article, educational researchers, experienced school leaders and education practitioners share their insights into school leadership. These insights culminate the *2016 Tokyo International Education Conference* (IJICC, 2016) themed on Global Leadership. To explore such a question, the authors have chosen five elements for discussion. These themes centre around leaders embracing a moral purpose and creating conditions for change; leading learning in the school; the changing role of leadership in a complex and multi-faceted context and finally leading collaboration of all stakeholders. This detailing provides a foundation for the exploration of school leadership from the perspective of all stakeholders.



School leaders are coming under increasing pressures to improve the teaching and learning performance in their schools (Mette & Scribner, 2014; Pont, 2014; Sell, Lynch, & Doe, 2016). Insights from numerous research reports (see for example (Leithwood, K., Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Lynch, Madden, & Doe, 2015; Mendals, 2012; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003) and publications from leading entities such as the *Wallace Foundation* (Harvey, Holland, & Cummins, 2013) that the ‘school leader’ (the principal or Head) remains the most influential force in optimising schooling outcomes and in bringing about the required circumstances for school improvement agendas. Compared to the past a contemporary school leader is required to navigate and work within multifaceted and increasingly complex contexts (Markow, Marcia, & Lee, 2013; Mulford, 2008). To maximise effectiveness in the multi-dimensional school environment Fullan (2014) posits an effective school leader requires a repertoire of skills the acumen to synchronously act as an agent of change able to move people, a leader of learning able to model and shape conditions for learning and be a systems player able to benefit from and contribute to systems improvement (p.3). In summary, an effective leader is someone who is able to “pull all the pieces together and not leave anyone working in isolation” (Harvey et al., 2013 p.22).

So, what constitutes effective school leadership? In this article, educational researchers, experienced school leaders and education practitioners share their insights into school leadership. These insights culminate the *2016 Tokyo International Education Conference (IJICC, 2016)* themed on Global Leadership. To explore such a question, the authors have chosen five elements for discussion. These themes centre around leaders embracing a moral purpose and creating conditions for change; leading learning in the school; the changing role of leadership in a complex and multi-faceted context and finally leading collaboration of all stakeholders. This detailing provides a foundation for the exploration of school leadership from the perspective of all stakeholders.

1. Embracing of a Moral Purpose

A deeply considered moral purpose informs leaders and teachers who wish to effect sustainable change in their schools (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Communicated clearly, consistently, and inclusively, a moral purpose becomes a guide for the stakeholders of a community to reference and evaluate their decisions and actions. Fields (2007) points out that when leaders articulate and



demonstrate a strong moral purpose they are likely to generate positive and effective collective action among stakeholders in a school. Furthermore, Fullan, Rincon-Gallardo, and Hargreaves (2015) indicate that:

Groups with commitments to a compelling moral purpose and to each other (rather than merely teams which are collections of people drawn together to perform particular tasks) act in more responsible and accountable ways than any external force can make them do (2015, p. 6)

Working as (or in) a ‘group’--- the team--- is more effective than the individual when bringing about reform based change in a school (Leana, 2011). A shared moral purpose provides a reference framework that guides stakeholders when sharing their expertise, experience, ideas, practices and resources when engaged in systemic change. This is because a shared moral purpose establishes the philosophical understanding that enables people to collaborate, agree, share and achieve an objective together. If the moral purpose of a school is to make a difference in the life chances of every student enrolled (Caldwell & Spinks, 2013; Fullan, 2015; Hattie, 2015b) then all stakeholders have an intrinsic motivation to turn the moral purpose into a reality. Not only do parents, regardless of their socioeconomic background, skills and abilities, want the best for their child, according to Kane and Mallon (2006)

Kane and Mallon (2006) teachers have an “individual intrinsic motivation to working with children, to make a useful contribution to society and to gain personal fulfilment from a job well done.” Honouring the commitment teachers have to working with children, and making clear how the shared moral purpose will contribute to society will encourage teachers to incorporate the communicated moral purpose into their own outlook. Coupling the stakeholder motivation to support and drive positive change in the school is the role of the school leader. Robertson (2011) posits that effective leaders in education - principals and teachers - understand, “they [are] part of a much bigger picture in education, beyond their own class, their own school” (p.4). Taken together, an agreed, considered and shared moral purpose drives positive change beyond the short-term needs of an individual institution or community; it is transferable, scalable and applicable, ensuring durability and continuity. Therefore, one aim of a shared moral purpose is to establish new norms and patterns of behaviour (West-Burnham, 2009). To do this effective educational leaders adopt a process of transparency (Duderstadt, 2007) that accounts for and reconciles the



assorted interests and agendas of multiple stakeholders (Bezzina, 2007; Keller, 2014). Our conclusion is that the development of a shared moral purpose is the keystone to driving school improvement. Without it, we argue, attempts to create effective school improvement is unlikely shortens the odds of long-term benefits.

2. Conditions for changing the school climate

Having established that a shared moral purpose is the keystone underpinning school improvement, we advance the idea that it is the quality of a school's climate that determines a school's capacity to sustain improvement. A school's climate is determined by the character of norms, values and expectations that impact on the interpersonal and collective relationships within the school at any given point in time (Lynch, et al, 2016; Lynch and Smith, 2016a; 2016b; Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009).

In this paper, we place the concept of social capital at the heart of a school's climate. As Putnam (2001) states as the "central idea of social capital, ..., is that networks and the associated norms of reciprocity have value (p.1). Leana and Pil (2006) seminal research points to the value of social capital brings to school's climate in the circumstances where the interactions between school leaders and teachers is based on building reciprocal trust, respect and professional collaboration.

We hasten to add that a school climate is not contextually nor culturally neutral. It has a relationship to the circumstances of the situation (context) and to established pattern of behaviours (culture). Thus an effective school leader needs to bridge the dichotomies and multiple discourses within the school. Knowing this and when aiming to build social capital an effective school leader applies creative responsiveness (Carmody, 2009) and cultural sensitivity (Keller, 2014). In other words, they can comfortably deal with "with competing and diverse viewpoints and perspectives" (p,19) and cultural dualities present within the school.

With this in mind, creating conditions for a positive school climate where mutual trust and professional collaboration are key professional behaviours and norms requires, in the first instance the seeding of a performance and development culture that strategically aligns moral purpose, vision, strategic goals and engages the whole stakeholder community (Doe, 2011; Doe, 2015a, 2015c; Quinn & Doe, 2016)



Therefore, one can understand the conditions for a climate of change as comprising:

Developing A shared Vision:

A Having a shared and agreed vision is the glue that holds a school together (Doe, 2015a; Lynch, et al, 2015). Bezzina (2007) posits that shaping a shared vision is reliant on the school leader “fostering deep and broad learning within relationships of abiding care for others” (p. 19).

A shared vision is achieved through staff understanding, agreeing and committing to a moral purpose. An effective leader removes barriers for change and creates opportunities for teachers to implement new initiatives and innovations (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Doe’s research (Doe, 2011; Doe, 2013; Doe, 2014; Doe, 2015b) indicates this is possible when leaders utilise ST2P *Make Space* strategy. This is where the team vision is clearly developed and articulated. It is the first step of several designed to improve the school’s climate. It requires the leader to consider and account for the intellectual, emotional, physical and virtual dimensions that influence expectations, norms and behaviours.

A Focus on “Putting faces on the data”

Sharratt and Fullan (2012) point out the value and benefits of teachers and school leaders using data to inform the development of school programs including develop personalised learning for each child. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) contend that data does not drive decision-making rather it informs it. They posit that the analysis of student data to develop new and deeper understanding of teacher and school impact on student learning is the norm plays a central role to developing a professional school climate.

Staff desire for change:

Building upon a teacher’s readiness for change is “lighting the fire” (or internal desire) to change. In some settings, this may refer to raising staff professionalism or improving staff working conditions (school climate). Doe’s (2011) ST2P leadership model for change initiatives identifies this stage as *Take Time*. The key to raising staff morale is ensuring those affected by leadership decisions are involved in the decision-making process itself and have the resources and support to enact the decisions. Simply put this takes time and requires the leader to provide opportunities and space where the sharing of ideas is the norm.



Culture:

A culture of internal accountability has been identified as a key ingredient in creating a professional school climate (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2015; Fullan et al., 2015; Sell, 2014; Sell, Grimstad, & Williams, 2012). Schools with strong internal accountability compared to schools driven primarily by external accountability regimes are more likely to have greater capacities to adjust to the complex changes characterising today's education context (Elmore, 2011).

A focus on thinking skills:

This entails that staff professional learning is focused on the thinking skills, the higher order cognitive processes that turn research into action (Doe, 2013; Doe, 2014; Doe, 2015b), not just specific to a defined project, but as a change management process.

A focus on Staff capability development:

If a school is aiming to transform its school climate through the development of the staff capability, then Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) provide a compelling case suggesting school leadership focus on building and improving its Professional Capital. They posit when a school climate is characterised by a high level of Professional Capital we see a strong and sustained collaborative culture that subsequently raises the school's human, social and decisional capitals. The building of professional capita, with a particular focus on increasing social capital in the school, will lead to the conditions that enable structured and systematic professional learning to become the norm.

3. Professional Learning: Leading Teachers to Become Researchers

School Principals and associated school-based leaders often design and deliver professional development for their teaching staff based on current government/educational legislation or latest educational trends. Alternatively, educators may attend external gatherings where education experts deliver programs. Stevenson (2016) identifies that providing professional development in this manner does allow it to be quantifiably measured as days attended, hours completed and certificates issued. Allowing school leaders to claim that staff have been 'developed' and thus ready to practise professionally until further 'development' is required (p.2). For some time, various authors have been "critical of professional development conceived of as something that one 'does',



or that is ‘provided’, or is ‘done’ to teachers”(Mayer & Llyod, 2011 p. 3). Whilst these types of one-off professional development sessions which, as categorised by Doe (p.107 in Lynch et al., 2015) “effectively represent a compliance issue having been ‘ticked off” may be effective in raising awareness of new policies and practices, they are not all that effective in bringing about improved teaching (Cole, 2012). While the delivery of one-off professional development sessions and workshops may be a suitable box ticking exercise, real change in teacher practice involves the teacher “questioning their values, beliefs and long-established habits” (Helsing, Howell, Kegan, & Lahey, 2008, p. 439) and inquiring deeply and systematically into their practice with the focus on better understanding their impact on student learning (Sell & Lynch, 2014).

When it comes to defining teacher professional learning, educational leaders must stop “providing leadership in the form of solutions” Heifetz and Laurie (1997, p. 124) and provide platforms that allow teachers to design their own research and seek their own practical solutions: to be teachers as researchers. On a related plane, Hattie (2015b) argues that school leaders need to create a trusting environment where teachers have the capacity to evaluate the impact and interpret the effects of their teaching on student outcomes. Then comes the need for a framework that articulates and then guides each teacher’s development through professional learning.

In Australia, the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (AITSL, 2011) provide such a framework. These national standards are explicit in outlining the importance of teachers engaging in professional learning by way of critiquing relevant research and engaging in their own research to improve their practice. The use of multiple sources of ‘teaching and learning’ evidence including: student assessment data, curriculum documents, teaching practices and feedback from parents, students and colleagues to conduct regular reviews of their teaching and learning programs are advised.

Research conducted by teachers, individually or collaboratively, may take different forms and serve a range of purposes. However, its primary aim is the formulation of understandings into teaching and learning, in context, and from which improvements can be made for student learning effect (Stremmel, 2007). For this reason, a distinction may exist between teacher research and university-based research, as the former is more about the very nature of educational practice than about methodology (Anderson & Herr, 1999).



Stremmel (2007) identifies that this ‘teacher-as-researcher’ model reunites the reflection and action (thinking and doing) sides of teaching and helps teachers “reclaim inquiry as a legitimate means of gaining knowledge and insights about teaching and learning” (p.1). Teachers who actively engaged in their own classroom research find it becomes “more meaningful (and personal) to the classroom practitioner, promotes the voice of the teacher and highlights their professional role” (Lynch et al., 2015; Sell & Lynch, 2014).

Moving away from the so called ‘solution-giving’ teacher professional development paradigm requires strong leadership and a strategic focus on improvement. Principals and other school-based leaders thus need to provide opportunities and create the required conditions to allow teachers to design and implement their own purpose-fit classroom research. In such an environment, teachers-as-researchers use classroom and other data to explore the effect their teaching practice is having on students ----moving away from anecdotes and other subjective assessments--- and focusing instead on quality evidence that informs the validity of their practice and shapes their future practices and professional learning (Hattie, 2015a, 2015b)

Having now made these brief comments about the notion of teachers as researchers we will explore teacher professional learning in more detail, by examining the hallmarks of effective school-based teacher professional learning regimes.

The education literature, referencing the work of researchers such as Hattie (2009) and Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001), argue that teachers make the difference in student learning outcomes. This requires school leaders to ensure their teachers are highly skilled through opportunities for professional learning (Doe, 2011; Doe, 2016; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Teachers increase their own professional learning by collaborating in action research and school improvement (Harris, 2014; Sharratt & Planche, 2016). Professional learning is said to best occur when teachers collaborate; the focus is on teachers supporting their own learning; relationships are sustained; engagement is decentralized and leadership is distributed; and ongoing inquiry and reflection about curriculum, pedagogy, school climate, politics, community is the norm (Harris, 2014; Sharratt & Planche, 2016).



4. Leadership is Multi-faceted in a School

To achieve the moral purpose of the school and make a difference in the life chances of all students then there needs to be a change in leadership models to enable this 'success for all students' as one person, the Principal or Head, cannot do it alone (Quinn & Doe, 2016). The traditional key leadership position of the school, the principal, is in the precarious position of being at the intersection between the school, the home and the community (Quinn, 2015). The principal faces pressure from Government to solve the problems of the community while catering for families of different socio economic status, ethnic and cultural backgrounds to with varying degrees of efficacy (Doe, 2013; Hattie, 2015b; Pushor, 2011). As noted earlier, the role of school leadership is a complex and seemingly changing daily. Couple the external pressure applied by governing bodies and the internal necessity to ensure that everyone associated with schools and education are heard and valued a re-think of the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders has occurred. One consequent, is the focus of leadership in schools has moved from a systemic managerial function to the leadership of teaching and learning in the school (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; LaBoskey, 2004; Lynch, et al, 2016; Lynch, 2011; Lynch et al., 2015; Lynch and Smith, 2016a; 2016b) while another focus the relationship between all stakeholders and the role they play in supporting student learning.

Quinn's (2016) research into parent engagement resulted in the *Collaborative Student Success Framework* that positions all stakeholders as the key to student success - School leadership, Teachers, Students and Parents.

Shared Leadership with Teachers

Shared leadership is evidenced when, as part of the school culture, teachers are offered opportunities to be researchers and lead in school-based professional learning communities (PLC's), action-learning situations, teaching teams or through collaborative teacher learning models (Doe, 2013, 2015b; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Harris, 2014; Sell & Lynch, 2014; Sharratt & Planche, 2016).

Shared Leadership with Students

This type of leadership occurs when instead of being passive receivers of knowledge from teachers, students are recognized as a major contributor to their own learning (Hattie, 2009) and are



encouraged to take an active role in assessing where their learning is at and making decisions as to where they can go for help (Sharratt & Fullan, 2012).

Shared Leadership with Parents

While parents were once outside observers of their child's schooling, now they are recognised as a valuable resource in the effective schooling agenda (Quinn, 2015, 2016). In light of this, Quinn (2015; 2016) developed a framework comprising 6 effective and simple strategies that parents can enact, particularly in the home that have an effect on student achievement. This framework is based on research across the world, in particular Goodall (2013) in the United Kingdom and Fox and Olsen (2014) in Australia. The 6 strategies are authoritative parenting; teaching their child the value of education; having high aspirations and realistic expectations; leading learning in the home; becoming engaged early and staying engaged throughout their child's schooling; and communicating with school (Quinn, 2016).

However, can parents be engaged at a deeper level and play a leadership role within the school as well as the home? Models for parent bodies and involvement in schools are now out-dated and were designed for the era when schools were unable to support themselves and needed the fundraising efforts of the parents and citizens (Millar, 2010).

Typically, in such models, parent organisations had a community building role and organized social events. This role is important in building relationships between the parents and the school but has little effect on the achievement and wellbeing outcomes for the students (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Quinn & Doe, 2016)

5. Leading Collaboration of all stakeholders

If a school is to achieve its moral purpose and make a difference in the life chances of every student enrolled a way forward for leadership in schools is through the collaboration of all stakeholders in the school- parents, teachers, school leadership and students. However, as Bezzina (2007) stated, "having named a shared moral purpose, or committing to shared leadership does not wipe away all the obstacles to success" (p.64). As noted earlier, the school leader is crucial to the process of enacting the moral purpose. Their vision and commitment to the moral purpose helps overcome the obstacles and allows them and the school community to work steadily towards achieving the shared goal.



The school leader is key to the degree of collaboration that takes place between all stakeholders. This brings a focus of the role of school leader to provided collaborative opportunities for parents that go beyond arranging social events for the school community.

While the *Theory of Action for Collaborative Learning* (Sharratt & Planche, 2016) outlines what collaborative learning might look like for educational system leaders working with school leaders; school leaders collaborating with teacher-leaders; teachers collaborating with other teachers; and teachers working with students, little seems to have been done in the area of implementing effective parent engagement strategies in relation to improving student learning.

According to Fullan (2014) a school leader is also a leader of learning. For a school community to become an authentic community of learners then the role of parents in partnership with the school needs addressing. It appears that the development of ‘collaborative expertise’ of the group (Hattie, 2015b; Sharratt & Planche, 2016) which in turn has shown to improve the ‘collective efficacy’ of teachers to some degree (Beauchamp, Klassen, Parsons, Durksen, & Taylor, 2014; Ross & Bruce, 2007). Based on this, it is logical to suggest that by enlisting the involvement of all stakeholders, including parents, in professional and collaborative learning it is possible to strengthen the collective efficacy of all stakeholders in the school community.

Conclusion

The work of the school leader is fundamental in its importance and in its capacity for ‘things’ to get done. As these brief insights have illustrated, the work of the school leader is complex and demanding and requires the adoption of new ways of leading. Once the school leader managed the systems and processes of the school while teachers busied themselves in their classrooms. Now they are change agents with a responsibility to create conditions that enable change to take effect. Contemporary research indicates the importance of the leader embracing a moral purpose as an important mechanism to guide positive and professional change. Now a school leader is a leader of learning and teaching where the insights into the teachers as researchers has shown that collaborative learning generates contextually valid professional knowledge that can be shared within the school community to improve student learning and progress. Taken together the world of schools and that of the leader appears ever more complex and in a cycle of continual change.



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