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Productive leaders and productive leadership

Schools as learning organisations

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Debra Hayes

University of Technology, Sydney, NSW, Australia

Pam Christie and Martin Mills

University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

Bob Lingard

University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

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Abstract *This paper draws on a three-year study of 24 schools involving classroom observations and interviews with teachers and principals. Through an examination of three cases, sets of leadership practices that focus on the learning of both students and teachers are described. This set of practices is called productive leadership and how these practices are dispersed among productive leaders in three schools is described. This form of leadership supports the achievement of both academic and social outcomes through a focus on pedagogy, a culture of care and related organizational processes. The concepts of learning organisations and teacher professional learning communities as ways of framing relationships in schools, in which ongoing teacher learning is complementary to student learning, are espoused.*

Introduction

The central theme of this paper is educational leadership focused on learning. This theme has arisen from our detailed classroom observations and interviews in 24 case study schools[1] as part of the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study[2] (QSRLS) (Lingard *et al.*, 2001). The QSRLS developed the concept of productive pedagogies to describe approaches to teaching that are linked to improved intellectual and social outcomes for all the students. Productive pedagogies are intellectually challenging, they recognise difference, they are embedded within a highly socially supportive classroom and they are strongly connected to the world beyond the classroom. In the following discussion we introduce the notion of productive leadership to describe leadership practices that support the development of productive pedagogies. We draw upon research within the fields of educational leadership and school reform to describe forms of leadership within our case study schools and their varying effects. We place emphasis on those forms of leadership that support the development of whole school communities as learning organisations in which ongoing teacher learning is complementary to student learning and which encourages the widespread practice of productive pedagogies. Three case studies from the QSRLS are utilised to illustrate the various forms of productive leadership.

A distinguishing feature of our analysis of school leadership is our interest in leadership focused on enhancing student social and academic learning (Lingard *et al.*, 2003). Even though, a literature review by Hallinger and Heck (1996) found that



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principal effects on student outcomes were small and indirect, our interest in this form of leadership is a consequence of how we have interpreted our detailed conversations with principals, deputies and heads of department and teachers during the period 1998-2000, set against our observations of almost 1,000 classes in their schools. Utilising a 20-item classroom observation instrument, the QSRLS team identified productive pedagogies as teaching practices that contribute to improved student performance on certain measures. Our findings confirm what has been long established in the school effectiveness literature: that when the socioeconomic status (SES) of students is considered, or controlled for, differences between schools account for only a small fraction of differences in pupil achievement (Coleman *et al.*, 1966; Fullan, 2000; Gray *et al.*, 1999; Scheerens, 1992; Stoll and Fink, 1996). Importantly, teacher characteristics account for a higher proportion of variation in student achievement than all other aspects of a school combined. Additionally, good teachers matter more for children from minority backgrounds; as Coleman *et al.* (1966) point out “[t]he effect of good teachers is greatest upon the children who suffer most educational disadvantage in their background” (Coleman *et al.*, 1966, p. 317). It is the possibility of school level effects on student outcomes that has encouraged us to focus on how educational leaders can support these effects, in particular how they can assist teachers to develop and utilise productive pedagogies

Leading learning

Our description of productive leadership maintains a position of ambivalence towards the tendency to equate educational leadership with individuals. Whilst we acknowledge the importance of individual leaders in schools, particularly principals, we also seek to describe the multiple forms of productive leadership that we observed during the QSRLS, exercised by individuals and groups other than the principal. Our approach to leadership resonates with Lambert (2000) who argues that, “leadership needs to be embedded in the school community as a whole [because] leadership is about learning together, and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively” (p. 3). Accordingly, we develop the notion of leadership dispersal to describe how productive leadership may be distributed throughout a school community (Lingard *et al.*, 2003). However, we still recognise a distinction between headship and leadership, with the former linked to organizational position and the latter to influence, which may be more dispersed throughout the school (Christie and Lingard, 2001).

The broad and diverse literature on educational leadership indicates that the concept of leadership is an elusive one – it has a “fuzzy logic”, as it were (Leithwood *et al.*, 2000, p. 5). The approach we have developed is that leadership may be understood in terms of social and power relations in specific contexts, places and times (Lingard *et al.*, 2003). While acknowledging the importance of individuals and context-appropriate activities as part of leadership (thereby acknowledging trait and situational theories of leadership), we use Bourdieu’s concepts of “habitus” and “field” to enable us to talk about the leader not simply in terms of personal characteristics and influence, but also in relation to the structured social spaces that make up the field of the school. Habitus refers to people’s acquired, socially constituted dispositions – the internalisation of the social structure so that its practices seem familiar, “taken for granted” and common-sense. Fields refer to structured social spaces with their own “invariant properties”, their own logics of practice, power relationships, internal structures and “rules of the game”.

Successful school leadership requires a habitus formed in relation to the field of the school, which has a “feel for the game” and the ability to act appropriately without conscious reflection. The field of the school overlaps with other fields – the economic field, the political field, fields of cultural production – and one of the tasks of the principal is to mediate the impact of these fields on the school. We acknowledge the normalising tendencies of the concept “productive leadership habitus”, which entails “habits of reflexive self-monitoring” (Brubaker, 1993, p. 214), a moral preparedness “to do the right thing and cause the right change” (Said, 1994, p. 75), and the capacity to deal with the wholeness of the school.

While recognising the significance of leadership practices (Lambert, 1998), we are aware of the multiple embedded contexts in which leaders are positioned and in which teachers practice (Talbert and McLaughlin, 1994). In relation to understanding these multiple embedded contexts, we have found the notion of teacher professional learning communities to be useful. This notion appears in numerous conceptualisations of the school as a learning organisation. Louis *et al.* (1996) identify five elements that they claim are critical to school professional community: shared norms and values, focus on student learning, reflective dialogue, deprivatisation of practice, and collaboration. The presence of these elements often supports learning by making explicit the types of pedagogies valued within the school and by providing opportunities for these pedagogies to be articulated and practised. Productive leadership, then, supports the development of schools as communities focused on learning by mobilising professional learning communities and aligning their practices with the development and support of productive pedagogies.

Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) highlight the key role of educational leadership in these communities. They make a distinction between those norms of practice that support a strong service ethic, reflected in high expectations for student success, and those that undermine such an ethic, reflected in low support for a strong service ethic and demand for student success. We treat this as a critical distinction and view the former norms of practice as hallmarks of productive leadership. This is particularly relevant for schools servicing disadvantaged communities where low expectations and aspirations for student achievements are often endemic features of school cultures.

Others within the literature of educational leadership also emphasise the need for leadership practices to focus on learning. For example, Sebring and Bryk (2000) describe the leadership style of principals in productive schools as being inclusive in orientation and focused on student learning whilst maintaining efficient management procedures. They claim that “principals of improving Chicago elementary schools skilfully use a combination of both pressure and support to enable and vitalize the efforts of adults who work directly with children” (p. 2, emphasis added). We argue that when educational leaders lead learning they build professional learning communities that focus on improved outcomes for all students within a context of pressure and support or supportive demandingness. When this focus is not present, leadership practices become complicit in the acceptance, and indeed, reproduction, of inequitable outcomes for students from groups that have a tradition of gaining less benefit from participation in schooling.

Hargreaves (1999) conceptualises the role of the principal in such a learning community – what he terms a knowledge-creating school – as one of knowledge management. “This involves understanding the state of the school’s overall

“intellectual capital” embedded in individuals and groups among the staff, the students and their families and communities. It also requires an understanding of the “organizational capital” embedded in the school’s structures and culture, the organizational competencies and capabilities which underpin the process of knowledge creation and utilisation” (p. 125). In such a school, productive leadership involves mapping and tapping the capacity of school communities to create “high quality knowledge about effective teaching and learning that is applicable and actionable in classrooms” (p. 136). Our findings support Hargreaves’ claim that “teachers must be at the heart of this creation” (p. 136). This also needs to embrace the notion of the school as learning community, of which the teacher professional learning community is a subset. Such a community would involve parents as full participants in the life of the school (Vincent, 2001).

Contemporary restructurings of educational systems toward various models of school-based management have repositioned the practices of school principals and other forms of leadership in schools. It is in this context that talk of principals as leaders, rather than as bureaucratic line managers, has come to the fore. Leithwood *et al.* (1996) in their introductory essay in the *International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Administration* comment on this very point:

From this redistribution of power and responsibility has emerged a decidedly non-bureaucratic image of the ideal educational organisation – flatter, more problem-than-task focused, and with highly permeable boundaries. This is an organisation less in need of control and more in need of support and capacity development. Organizational needs such as these seem more likely to be served by practices commonly associated with the concept of leadership as the term is used in the North American literature, or “management”, as that term is used in much of the European literature, than by practices commonly evoked by the term administration (Leithwood *et al.*, 1996, pp. 4-5).

The productive leadership we have seen at work in the three case study schools is about capacity building. However, there are also competing pressures on principals and other leaders within restructured schools. In this context, Gewirtz *et al.* (1995) speak of school principals now having to be “multilingual”, operating within multiple and competing discourses such as managerialism, entrepreneurialism, emergent professionalisms, diverse community politics, technologies of accountability and testing. A common effect of this repositioning is the submergence of educational considerations, in particular with those related to pedagogy, beneath other considerations. Thomson (1999), for example, has shown how contemporary professional and policy literatures for principals stress the technologies of management almost to the exclusion of educational considerations, with curriculum and certainly pedagogy being deafening silences. Even so, the following case studies illustrate that there are still multiple forms of leadership in schools that potentially interrupt this trend.

While we have found that concepts such as “teacher professional communities” and “learning organisations” are useful in focusing attention on schools as places of learning, it is also necessary to recognise that concepts such as these have the potential to operate as technologies of control. “Professional learning communities” may also be easily adopted as a strategy for promoting management goals, without building on teacher’s interests – a classic case of what Hargreaves terms “contrived collegiality”. Improperly used, professional learning communities may be used to drive towards consensus in ways which are inherently undemocratic and do not recognise legitimate differences in

teacher's views. The same cautions are necessary in using the term "learning organisation". Paradoxically, while schools are places of institutional learning for young people, they are not necessarily learning organisations in the broad sense of the term as developed by Argyris and Schon (1978) and Senge (1992). They may have a low capacity for problem solving, for learning from their experiences and their environments, and in changing themselves accordingly. Uncritically applying the term "learning organisation" to schools may have the unintended effect of masking the work that schools need to do if they are to be places of organizational and individual learning. Thompson and McHugh (1995) warn against deriving "behaviour technologies" from organizational theories and using them as strategies for increasing effectiveness, citing Locke and Latham's (1984) caution that "a practical bag of tools for solving human problems in organisations", if used improperly, can result in "conflict, feelings of failure, increased stress, dishonesty" (Thompson and McHugh, 1995, p. 317).

In what that follows we document leadership practices in three schools by, in each case, describing the location and character of the school. In doing so we recognise what Thomson (1999) refers to as the "thisness" of specific schools and hence the contextualised nature of educational leadership practices. All schools have the same "invariant properties" of schools – a world cultural institution according to the theorising of John Meyer and his colleagues at Stanford (Fuller, 1991; Meyer and Hannan, 1979), but each has its own idiosyncrasies or thisness while sitting within the genre. We also describe a number of emerging characteristics of productive leadership and describe how these forms of leadership support teachers to develop productive pedagogies. These characteristics of productive leadership include:

- a commitment to leadership dispersal which supports the spread of leadership practices and collaborative decision-making processes in building common vision and purposes;
- supportive social relationships within the school, between staff (teachers and others) and students;
- "hands on knowledge" about how educational theory translates into strategic action and is aligned with community concerns and relationships outside of the school;
- a focus on pedagogy in which leadership in a school is focused on improving student learning outcomes and learning with the school as a whole;
- support for the development of a culture of care which encourages teacher professional risk taking; and
- a focus on structures and strategies in which leadership focuses on developing organizational processes that facilitate the smooth running of the school.

Case one: Snappy Gum State High School

Relationships are the most important thing (Principal).

Snappy Gum State High School is located in a small country town that services a farming community of grain and cotton. There are pockets of poverty and few employment opportunities for school leavers. The staffing of Snappy Gum High is fairly stable, and it has faced to a lesser degree than most other country schools in the

study, the problem that staff “do country service” and move on. The principal has been at the school for more than ten years, and there is a core of committed teachers who have also been at the school for some time. The school is relatively small – 436 students – which means, in the words of one of the teachers, “it is big enough to have everything and small enough to be a very human place and you end up knowing everybody when you’ve been here for a couple of years”.

The principal is a strong presence at Snappy Gum. The school is very much “his” school, and reflects his great commitment to trying new things, innovating and ensuring the best possible outcomes for all students. The principal is regarded within the Queensland state education system as being very good, but as a “maverick” who is fiercely independent, always putting his own school first. The outstanding tertiary entrance scores of the school, which have received much media publicity, have also allowed him this degree of independence. The recognition is that he looks after the school in his own way.

There are a considerable number of exceptional teachers at Snappy Gum, according to the productive pedagogies classroom observation manual. As noted earlier, the school has also achieved high tertiary entrance scores. An interesting feature is that there are a number of very experienced teachers who have been at the school for a long time and who are open to, and are often the bearers of, change. Within the centralised staffing of the Queensland state education system this is an important feature. Another research school similarly located was by the way of contrast one in which the experienced teachers sought to halt or resist change. This was not the case at Snappy Gum.

Dispersal of leadership

Leadership within the school is very principal directed, but alongside this has been an emphasis on the importance of “moving ahead together”. As expressed by one of the teachers, “Everyone has a stake in decisions that affect everyone. We never really sort of get decisions landed upon us after they’re made unless there was really no alternative.”

For nearly ten years, Snappy Gum has had advisory committees made up of staff, parents and students to address four key areas: human resources, resources, studies, and organizational management. The staff are free to join one or more committees and to participate as frequently or infrequently as they choose. These committees make recommendations to the principal who, in his words, has “made a commitment that that we will not make changes as administrators in the school without going through the appropriate channels for change”. A significant illustration of this is that although the principal was keen for Snappy Gum to be part of Education Queensland’s Leading Schools program (Lingard *et al.*, 2002), he respected the staff’s cautious position on the issue and moved ahead more slowly in the formation of a School Council. At the time of our research in the school, a number of staff made reference to a major restructuring of the timetable that was developed through months of deliberation by the Studies Committee. The process of not moving ahead with changes until sufficient support has been built among staff and parents is a key leadership strategy for the principal.

In addition to the four major advisory committees, Snappy Gum also has an active Student Council that reports regularly to the administration. The principal’s view on this is that “we involve children in learning all the data and information necessary to

make sensible decisions. I must admit I'm trusting of them." The principal uses the Student Council to pursue broad citizenship goals of schooling.

Relationships with students and staff

One of the distinctive features of Snappy Gum is that it has attempted to build a unifying philosophical underpinning, based on "Choice Theory". This has provided a coherent approach to "behaviour management" within the school and a unifying language for teacher professional discourse. Whether due specifically to this or not, it is the case that the school puts effort into building relationships of trust at all levels, and, according to one of the deputies, "the ethos in the school is such that it's very unusual to have a fight at school." Partly because of the smallness of the school, as well as the involvement of many of the staff in after-school activities, relationships with students are often based on personal knowledge. In the principal's words, "Relationships are the most important thing. You can have a brilliant teacher in terms of their academic knowledge, but without the relationship with the kids, they won't learn."

Similarly, staff commented on the supportiveness of the administration, and on the professional relationships that exist between staff. There is no doubt that the commitment of the principal to the school over many years, as well as the operation of the committee system, has led to a position where the staff feel that their voices can be heard.

Community relations

Snappy Gum is highly regarded within the local community. As one of the teachers put it, "parents are almost unanimously supportive of the school." The school has a reputation for excellence and many parents choose to send their children there from some distance away. There is a hostel to cater for these students. While supportive of the school, the community is also regarded by the principal and staff as generally "very conservative", and the principal has taken care to bring the community on board when introducing changes. The approach, according to one of the deputy principals, has been that "the principal makes the decision, but listens to the advice of the community." Again, the concern is to ensure that "people move forward together". Energetic projects such as building a school hall, developing curriculum areas such as manual arts and technology, and establishing a farm, have built the community confidence necessary for more controversial changes such as the introduction of Choice Theory as the basis for behaviour management in the school.

Focus on pedagogy

As mentioned earlier, teachers at Snappy Gum scored high on the productive pedagogies scales, and the school have also achieved noteworthy results in tertiary entrance scores. There is no doubt that the school maintains a strong focus on pedagogy. A crucial dimension of this is a strong commitment to professional development for all the staffs. Given that the school is geographically far from major centres, the principal has placed particular emphasis on supporting professional development, both inside as well as outside the school. The professional development policy of the school encourages teachers to choose topics for the year, and to report back to heads of departments on what they have found useful. The school provides whatever financial and resource support that it can. And part of the reciprocity of this

is that a number of staff voluntarily provide weekend and after hours tutorials for students, and, in the principal's view, "Everybody pitches in wherever they can."

There was a well developed teacher professional learning community at Snappy Gum. All of the teachers interviewed spoke easily about their pedagogy, and references were made to the many opportunities for informal meetings and exchanges on teaching and learning. The impression given was that teachers are encouraged to try a range of methods in pedagogy and assessment.

As well as informal professional discussions, there are also formal procedures in place for looking at curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. All new teachers at the school, no matter about their age or experience, are watched in their classes by the administration and their heads of department. At the end of every semester, the administration discusses each set of assessment results with the heads of departments, who then explore these with staff as a way of reflecting upon pedagogy. Snappy Gum has also used schools in large near-by provincial city to exchange test papers and discuss results. The principal acknowledges that this form of scrutiny needs to be based on trust, and to be carried out in a non-threatening way so that it can be an effective learning experience for staff.

Snappy Gum does not focus exclusively on high academic achievement. According to the principal, part of the school's focus on pedagogy is to operate inclusively: "We take everybody, no matter who you are, and we'll do the best we can, from the academic, to the sports, to the special needs." Every attempt is made to "maintain children on some form of program which keeps them (a) off the streets and (b) maturing in some way, and that might just be social. . . We've accepted that we'll battle through with those kids as best as we can, and if that means alternative programs, well so be it". Issues identified for special attention include boys and literacy, the low self-esteem of students who are not succeeding in academic work, "the alienation of the unemployable", and the need to work with specific individual cases. The principal encourages trying "just to show as much care and concern as we can". He is all too aware, however, that "what these students need is jobs" and he strongly opposes as "economic rationalist nonsense" any suggestions that students face unemployment because of inadequate education. One of the ways in which inclusivity is addressed in the school is by providing professional development opportunities for staff to develop fuller understanding of particular issues and how to work with them. The relatively small number of Aboriginal students are supported by a community education person who visits the school weekly and keeps in touch with families.

Culture of care

Support for professional development is one of the ways in which Snappy Gum shows concern for its staff. In the words of one of the heads of department, "As far as professional development goes, this is one of the most progressive schools. . . and I think that the staff know that their personal needs and their professional needs are being met. I think that goes a long way to building staff morale as well". As the principal stated, "we understand that teacher development as a human being is just as important as their professional development, because you can't be a good teacher unless you're growing as a person". At the same time, the principal attempts to achieve a balance between personal and professional support, saying that teachers "need their spare time, they need their family time".

Building trust within the school has been a priority for the principal, as well as establishing relationships between staff so that there are minimal antagonisms between subject areas and staff.

Focus on structures and strategies

In the principal's view, a major task he faces is "maintaining the focus" across a range of different school activities: "what is best for the kids, what's best for the school, how can we make sure that teachers are getting what they want to get. . . . And make sure that all of that is concentrated as best as we can most of the time on the students' learning". Having achieved a number of his goals in the past 11 years, he sees his goal for the next 3 years as being to develop Choice Theory more fully within the teaching practices of the school.

The principal of Snappy Gum is very well-informed about developments in the state department of education – Education Queensland – and has clear ideas about how best to position the school in relation to them. However, he was at times a little disdainful of the district office because in his views they did not know how to support schools and their capacity building. At the same time, he is well networked with other principals in similar schools. Viewing his accountability in broad terms as being towards "what's best for the student", he is confident about finding ways of working within government policies for what he believes is best for the school.

Case two: Casuarina State Primary School

We're on about difference, not deficit (Principal).

Casuarina State School is situated on the outskirts of Brisbane in one of the poorest areas in the State of Queensland. There is a significant amount of welfare dependency in the area. The principal of the school has noted that many new teachers often ask if the students bring guns and knives to school. Countering myths about the community and the students who come from this community has been one of the major aims of the school community. This has entailed rejecting deficit models of the students and their parents, and also in promoting a sense of community amongst all the staff, both teaching and non-teaching. This attitude is summed up by a key saying within the school: "We don't bag kids, we don't bag parents and we don't bag each other". Such an attitude has enabled a focus within the school on what is achievable in relation to the students' learning, rather than upon negatives.

Dispersal of leadership

One of the significant features of the leadership at the school has been the encouragement of teachers to engage in professional development related to learning within the school and to pursue particular interests that fit in with the aims determined by the school community. This has had a number of payoffs. One of these has been the creation of leadership dispersal amongst the staff. For instance, one long term staff member commented on how the principal at this school was "very much about encouraging people and allowing them scope to expand their abilities and take responsibility". According to the teacher, this

...has meant that this school produces leadership in its staff, and leadership that is recognised in this State . . . In ten years at this school which is a small school with a small

staff, teachers have gone on and become reading and recovery tutors, five or six have gone on to become education advisers, one teacher became a key teacher for the year two net and teachers take an active part in the multi age association and do things outside of the school to promote it. I think that is a direct result of teachers taking things on and building confidence in themselves.

Significant within the principal's approach has been the encouragement of risk-taking amongst the staff. This does mean that at times things go wrong. However, as she commented "We have a big no blame zone in the school". This has meant that there has been an emphasis on collective responsibilities, and as she commented, this has consequences for the ways in which staff relate to each other and to the principal. For her, "collective responsibilities' takes into account relationship stuff, and to get . . . optimum work out of people you've got to have that. You've got to know that when the tough is tough, there's people going to be around you." She also noted how there were many staffs who also supported her when things have been difficult for her as well – a culture of care. The notion of the staff being a team was evident in many of the teachers' comments as well as in those by the school administrators.

Relationships with students and staff

This principal stresses the importance of healthy and supportive relationships between herself and the students and staff. This was confirmed by the staff in the school who spoke of the principal's involvement in relationships with both students and teachers. Clearly from our observations and interviews with teachers, "respect" underpins the way in which most relationships within the school are played out. This means that whilst there is a sense that both teaching and non-teaching staff are all part of the same team, people's expertise is recognised and valued. For instance, the principal commented, "I don't want a cleaner telling a teacher how to teach. But, what I do want are the cleaners' perceptions of how this school can be improved in all aspects. I want teachers' perceptions of how this school can improve across all aspects. So that's where they overlock, but it doesn't mean we go in and tell others how to do their job".

The importance of respect also came through in an anecdote which she gave about how some teachers had written an inappropriately worded letter to parents at home, for which a parent contacted the school. The principal noted how the content in this letter had the potential to cause an "explosion" amongst parents. She even admitted that when she read the letter, she had read it incorrectly. However, instead of admonishing these teachers, the incident was treated as an error and a solution was worked out with the staff concerned:

So I went to them and said, "guys, look I've read it like this", they explained, we rewrote the letter, like proper official heading, they signed, the same ones who wrote the letter, sent it back, clarified it . . . So there's a problem, it had a huge potential to blow, but I know, and I believe they know, that there's no way I would have sold them out. I wouldn't have. It was just an error.

This respect is also apparent in the ways that the principal has sought to build relationships between the school and the outside community.

Community relations

A key person within the school is a parent who is employed as a liaison person between the school and the parents. Her position was funded out of money from the

Commonwealth government's Disadvantaged Schools' Program (Connell *et al.*, 1991) prior to the current principal's appointment to the school. However, her profile has risen steeply under the current principal. The principal very much regards her as a partner, and indeed, she operates to a great extent as a second deputy within the school. She has spoken at principals' conferences about the school, goes on in-services with teachers and is involved in the decision-making processes within the school. She serves as the first point of contact for all new enrolments at the school, and also as a person who the teachers can talk to about the parents. She described her role as follows:

The initial idea was to be sort of a middle person between parents and staff because we had a lot of parents then, and we still have a significant number, who have either had bad experiences with schools, haven't been back into them since they were children and are not sure how to talk to teachers or sometimes just have social skills that are different to the staff. And it is the same with the staff. Our staff, in some instances, are different from some of our community members. It was sort of, a half way person. If they felt more comfortable coming to me, they'd come to me. But over the years it has sort of grown. The majority of parents now, because they have that initial introduction into the school, know that it's open and it's friendly, it's going to meet their needs as well as their child's as much as we can, are quite comfortable going to the teachers. I probably do more work with the teachers now in helping them to understand that when certain parents say things, they're not being rude or offensive or something, it is just their style and if you can help them to understand where they are coming from and give them a bit of background and give them a few hints.

The way in which she and the position of community liaison are highly regarded is testament to the principal's comment that: "if we're serious about our role of community then we have to not just talk it but to show it".

One of the long term members of the staff noted how prior to the current principal, "the school didn't get involved in a lot of things outside the school". This changed after the appointment of the new principal. For instance, serious attempts have been made to consult with the parents and guardians of students at the school about ways in which the school could be improved. Because of the literacy levels of many of the parents a written survey was not effective in eliciting sufficient responses, so a group of volunteers (parents, teaching and non-teaching staff) conducted interviews with every third "family" to get their thoughts on the school. Behaviour was the biggest issue raised by parents and guardians. A large forum for over two days was then called and all parents were invited to attend to explore this issue in greater depth. A variety of values surfaced through these consultation processes, many of which were quite contradictory. Through this process a decision was made to focus on social skills and to trial the use of "a responsible thinking classroom" (RTC). There has been constant consultation and feedback to parents about this process. The principal noted how "it's not a little bit of consultation, it's huge".

Focus on pedagogy

The development of the RTC was seen by many within the staff as being part of the school's sustained and in-depth focus on pedagogy, and, in particular, developing cooperative learning strategies amongst the students. Prior to our arrival at the school the whole staff had just completed a 45 h in-service on cooperative learning. This had required a huge commitment on the part of teachers, including a Saturday and a number of evenings. In return, the number of staff meetings were halved for the term in

which the in-service took place, and they were never held in the same weeks as the in-service. The deputy principal commented how enthused a number of teachers had been about experimenting with the ideas growing out of the in-service (despite a few grumblings during the training). For instance, he noted how:

... cooperative leaning is starting to occur right throughout different curriculum areas in the school. Teachers are talking about it and discussing it not just in the staff meetings but at lunchtime and popping in to tell me about their successes. And I see in my wanders that it is occurring in classrooms. ... Another benefit was an unexpected one in that it helped create a more cohesive staff.

Focus on culture of care

One of the overwhelming senses one has when visiting this school is the amount of effort which goes into the support for the emotional well being of both staff and students. This is not something which has come effortlessly. The parent liaison office spoke of the work that she and the principal do in this regard, especially in relation to protecting those teachers who are constantly prepared to take on new work:

... we need to watch they don't burn out, and every now and again (the principal) will say "I don't think I'll ever let so and so do this and I don't think someone else should do that because they're just taking on too much". And every now and then I'll go, "So and so is just about at the end of their tether and I am going to be extra nice to them for a week or so". And so we monitor each other. And most of the staff don't know we do that to the extent we do. I am sure a lot of them just think it happens. But we spend long hours agonising. You've got to enjoy your working environment. And we work really hard to help people do that. I like to work in a place where I feel comfortable and I don't see why anyone else would be any different. And it doesn't just happen, the office workers will tell you that, the teachers will tell you too.

This attention to the well being of staff is also there for students. This too is apparent in some of the comments made by the parent liaison person:

I have had visitors to the school who come in and see we look tired and the amount of ourselves we give to the kids and their needs and everything. We've had other administrators come through and they'd say, "What are you doing it like that for? Process them and get them out". Our kids don't respond to being processed and get them out. We will have hundreds of kids through first aid first term because they want some TLC (tender loving care). They want someone to talk to. You can't say you're too busy to have seen Susie's pride and joy that she had brought along. I have got a photo of one of the kid's dogs on my wall they gave me at the shopping centre one day. Because you need to make everyone feel they're special.

There is also the potential for some parents to become quite volatile when dealing with the school. A lot of work has gone into developing strategies for dealing with such situations. This management of staff, students and parents' emotions does not come without a price, again as the liaison person states, "... it is very draining dealing with the sort of emotional rollercoaster that is going on around you a lot of the time".

Focus on structures and strategies

There are clear strategies that the leadership within Casuarina has developed for working with the central bureaucracy and mandated policies. The school has clear and well articulated aims in relation to the community and for developing appropriate pedagogies for the students in the schools. Central policies and concerns that interrupt or deviate those working within the school from these aims are often ignored. For

instance, one staff member commented how, "in terms of rule, etc.," I think (the principal) acts first and worries about rules later and we'll plead ignorance where necessary – "Oh dear I didn't know we shouldn't have done that."

Case three: Tallwood State High

Basically we've got a happy school without a lot of hassles, and it's a happening school, it's an exciting school to be in, and I'd just like to keep it boiling along (Principal).

Tallwood State High is over 300 km from Brisbane in a rural town with a population of around 5,000. The town's major rural products include wheat, cotton, beef and wool. There are also a number of service industries related to machinery sales and repairs. The prevalence of industries centred in and around the town ensures unusually high levels of employment for a rural community. Tallwood State High has had a long tradition of providing comprehensive secondary education to the town's children. Some of the teachers are ex-students and the school is closely linked to the local community through an expanding vocational education and training program. In the 18 months prior to our visit, the school had initiated a major reform process driven by a management team, which consisted of both teachers and administrators, supported by an external academic, informed by data collection and focused on pedagogy. In summing up the school's reform efforts in this time, the principal stated:

We've been through every change in timetable structure and those sorts of structures that it's possible to go through without producing the results, without producing any real results. They haven't been harmful, but they haven't progressed us along the way.

This explanation provides the context for the school's focus on learning. The school's longest serving deputy principal has led this focus. She views her long history in the school as a sign of commitment to the school and she acknowledges that the school's isolation has some benefits:

Sometimes when you're isolated you over-compensate, like you read a lot, you know, you make sure you're getting all the new literature because you don't want to be seen to be left behind. We've got a certain element of permanency on the staff, so they're committed to the school and the kids, and it only takes one or two [outstanding teachers] out there, talking in staffrooms and it's contagious, other people embrace the professionalism that they see them doing.

Dispersal of leadership

Tallwood State High is distinguished by the dispersal of leadership evident in the school. There are two deputies, an experienced and respected group of departmental heads as well the management team, composed of a cross-section of staff, with responsibility for curriculum reform. The principal describes his leadership style as that of a facilitator, supporter and delegator.

At times this gives the appearance of a "hands-off" leader, but it has created a space within which leadership may be dispersed and shared. The deputy principal describes this situation in the following way:

I sometimes think [that] if I had a really strong leader, I probably wouldn't have done nearly as much as what I have, but because of the way it's been, I've felt that if I didn't get up, then no-one else was going to. So I had to. But there's never a conflict about it.

Importantly, the principal has not attempted to block or contain the dispersion of leadership which extends to including the external academic who has functioned as a “critical friend” to the school community over a number of years. In collaboration with this critical friend the management team has guided the latest reform process in the school. In commenting on this initiative, the principal stated:

I sat back out of it and they took it on board themselves so it's staff generated and they've run it. It's quite remarkable actually, quite remarkable just looking at the sort of communication that's happening between staff that there's never been before, but at a professional level.

The management team has adopted a “fluid” approach to exercise leadership. The deputy principal explains:

Different people on the group have had responsibility for different things. [For example,] different people in the team have always gone and reported back to staff, so this is not about [me] driving [my] own little agenda again. It's about people in the school owning it. So that's been very deliberate to have that. Last week one of the [heads of departments] went to P&C to talk to them about it, how far we'd got with that sort of thing. So we're starting to inform external people.

Relationships with staff and students

The school publishes a regular student newsletter. During one of our visits to the school, it printed an article on bullying that was critical of the school's response to this issue. When asked about the newsletter, the principal commented,

I'm quite happy to listen to criticism of kids provided it's well founded... they gather all the information and if there's information we can use, great.

Community relations

The principal explained that teachers have been dogged by, “this thing in the school... about the local school not being good enough”. This perception was reinforced by some families sending their children to boarding schools, or the local Catholic high school. Similarly, the school's capacity to cater for the needs of children from a large nearby Aboriginal community has been a source of ongoing, but reportedly easing, tension. The principal noted,

Although staff believed that we're doing a very good job professionally... the students weren't getting the results [the staff] thought they should get, and they didn't believe the community thought they were doing a good job, even though the school opinion survey said that both parents and kids were [satisfied]... so they thought they'd better do something about it...

As a consequence, the school has developed a very close working relationship with the farming community and has hosted an international conference on learning in rural communities.

Focus on pedagogy

The focus on pedagogy at Tallwood High is led by the management team and the reforms they are guiding. An indication of the value the school places on their collective role is that members of the management team are given teaching release to attend meetings. As the deputy principal explains:

What we've done as a school that I thought was significant was that we actually released all of those teachers, the 9 teachers. We'd meet on a Thursday afternoon from 1 o'clock to 3 o'clock so it was given significance, you know, you are meeting and you're meeting in school time because it's valued.

The school's curriculum reform process has involved all teachers in focussing on pedagogy. The deputy principal described the process in the following way:

We ran a process where everyone on staff put down elements, 5 key elements that they thought were indicators of the best lesson they'd either taught themselves or had watched someone else teach. . . . In groups we looked and talked and discussed, and as a group we then came up with the 5 per group, so we're starting to condense it down. And what we came up with eventually was a list of, I think, 20 elements of key lesson plans, then we started to reduce that down and reduce that down. So we've kept that there in front of us all of the time. These are the things that we believe as a staff at Tallwood High School are significant in a good lesson plan. And it was at that point where I really started to realise that engaging teachers in that dialogue of what you're doing in a classroom was such a powerful thing.

At the same time, the deputy principal acknowledges that getting teachers to talk about pedagogy is not a straight forward matter:

It's really funny because when you talk to teachers about what constitutes good practice, they generally go to sort of generic tools, you know, the team work stuff, kids enjoying it, but they don't actually want to unpack it further to themselves. It's almost like we know generically because it's embedded what makes a good classroom, but it's very difficult for us to pull that back and say what is it that I get pleasure from in the classroom when I know I've walked out and done a good job. So it was really hard to get teachers to that point.

Culture of care

As well as dispersal of leadership at Tallwood there is an acknowledgment that different leaders have different skills. The explicit naming of these roles has enabled individual leaders to focus on what they are perceived to be good at and not feel at though they have to be good at everything. In the following comment, the deputy principal describes the high performance team workshop that the executive of the school undertook:

All of the [heads of departments] came out as implementers, you know, implement anything, which is great. That's why I think we do so much, they do implement really well. Both the [principal and the other deputy] came out as really strong people supporters. That was their strength. And I was the driver, right? So I guess there was nothing new in the world but it was really interesting for me to see that those two were really strong people supporters. I mean, that's really what they do very, very well. And it's probably an area – it was my second area – but it's probably an area that I did a lot better before I had all these other external commitments, but because of my external commitments which have really manifested themselves this year, I'm finding I have less time to do the people support that I should be doing because I know a lot of the programmes I drive and I probably haven't been there picking up the pieces as well as what I could. But I also know that there's a lot of strong people out there who do quite a bit of that.

Focus on structures and strategies

The principal describes some reform initiatives within the school as "data driven". One innovative source of such data is the student destination study that has been completed

every year since 1994. Administrative assistants spend time every year making phone calls to parents and contacting other sources of information in the community to record the destinations of past students. This study has revealed that, whilst most former students are employed, only around 15 per cent continue on to further education. The principal explained that the increased emphasis on vocationally based subjects and “traineeships” in the senior school is a direct response to this information.

The previously mentioned curriculum reform was also informed by data collection processes. One of these involved a parent and student school opinion survey. The principal related how this survey strongly suggested that the community valued the school and rated the work done by the staff as of high quality. Despite this, the principal noted that the staff continued to express concern about the stand of the school in the local community. It was the intervention of the critical friend who used this perception of the staff as a leverage for initiating the change.

Conclusion

In these examples, from the QSRLS we have attempted to illustrate forms of productive leadership in three schools which have principals with very different leadership styles. We suggest that style is not as important as the willingness of these principals to contribute to the development of broad-based learning communities within their schools. In this regard, the principals we described shared some common ground: they promoted dispersal of leadership; they encouraged the development of positive relationships, taking responsibility for much of the emotional labour associated with supporting and maintaining these relationships; they worked to ensure that matters of pedagogy took priority on the school’s agenda and within leadership practices; and, they were fully cognisant of departmental policies and directives whilst not feeling unduly bound by them. These features of productive leadership resonate with the features of professional learning communities and learning organizations that have been identified in the literature.

These principals also demonstrated a willingness to “roll up their sleeves” and work with teachers and students on the day-to-day minutiae of school life. This is in contrast to a number of principals we observed who remained aloof from staff and students and gave the appearance of being more concerned with looking like the CEO of a major corporation than the educational leader of a school community. This type of principal has a clear management rather than pedagogical focus, which is not to argue that a well managed school is not important, but rather to stress the importance of placing pedagogical considerations at the core of school culture. Productive leaders are also capable of making hard decisions in the face of opposition – a crucial part of productive leadership habitus which we view as self-reflective, moral and able to deal with the school as a whole. Just as we have spoken about the need for teachers to demonstrate a supportive demandingness in their classrooms (Lingard *et al.*, 2000), productive leaders demonstrate this by discerning when to drive reforms and when to pull back. They understood the required and appropriate balance between pressure and support for change.

Whilst we have described the leadership of three principals, our primary interest is in those aspects of leadership which are embedded within a field of relations (Christie and Lingard, 2001). For example, we suggest that principals should promote dispersal of leadership, but anticipate that their style and local conditions will also contribute to

the form this may take in each school. Some may purposefully step back, thus allowing others to step forward, and some may actively encourage others to assume leadership responsibilities. There are also those leaders who are more like figureheads, but who do not hinder others from assuming active leadership roles in the school. Similarly, Louis *et al.* (1996, p. 193) have observed, "Confirming the findings of other recent research, we found that the most effective administrative leaders delegated authority, developed collaborative decision-making processes, and stepped back from being the central problem solver". Despite their differences, the principals described in this paper supported a culture of leadership and collective responsibility focused on outcomes and pedagogy. This would seem to be the central to effective leadership in schools and suggestive of a means by which principal effects on improving student performance may be strengthened.

Notes

1. For a more detailed description of the QSRLS see Lingard *et al.* (2003), *Leading Learning: Making hope practical in schools*, Open University Press, Maidenhead.
2. The members of the QSRLS research team are (in alphabetical order): Joanne Ailwood, Mark Bahr, Ros Capeness, David Chant, Pam Christie, Jenny Gore, Debra Hayes, James Ladwig, Bob Lingard, Allan Luke, Martin Mills, Merle Warry.

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