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Strategies for Hope and Sustainability, The Beginning Principal: needs and challenges

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STRATEGIES FOR HOPE AND SUSTAINABILITY

The Beginning Principal: needs and challenges

Ms Debra Sayce and Associate Professor Shane Lavery CFC

Introduction

Since the 1990s, educational leaders in developed countries have experienced significant change across all educational systems. To date, this momentum for rapid change has continued unabated. Political pressures on schools continue to increase as short term governments expect improvements in educational outcomes in shortened periods of time. Public expectations of performance by schools are intensifying. School effectiveness dominates professional discourse. Learning technologies have expanded. Family contexts have changed and the nature of the educational workforce is dictated by society's economic and social situation. Catholic school principals, in addition to coping with such issues, are also regarded as leaders within the Catholic Church. The religious dimension of their leadership role requires significant faith-based grounding and knowledge about the Church in order to carry out their duties and responsibilities. For beginning principals in Catholic schools, their role is even more complex, demanding and challenging. They not only have to negotiate all the demands placed on them as Catholic school leaders, they also have to grapple with the newness of the role. This paper presents findings from a qualitative research study seeking to identify the professional and personal needs of newly appointed principals in Catholic education in Western Australia.

Theoretical Perspective

Literature on the concerns of beginning principals is limited. There is, certainly, a significant body of research on the principal, *per se*, that concentrates on such issues as duties, decision-making, school improvement, leadership models and school culture (Fullan, 2008; Ubben, Hughes & Norris, 2007; Jazzar & Algozzine, 2006). Those studies which do focus on new principals tend to address personal and professional needs, in particular, the skills required to survive the initial challenges of the role. For example, Daresh (2006) posits a framework of key skills based on problems identified by researchers investigating needs of new principals. Daresh crystallises these skills into three themes: Technical and Managerial Skills, Socialisation, and Self-Awareness (pp, v-vi). These themes form the basis for the theoretical perspective of this article.

Technical and Managerial Skills broadly cover the operational details that enable a school to function in a clear and orderly direction. These details include government and system accountabilities, financial management, educational direction, staffing and facilities management. Principals are under constant pressure to account to parents, governments, school boards and staff on all school policies and practices. It requires a managerial style which ensures that schools are seen to be publicly performing in ways that are measurable (Daresh, 2006; Perry & McWilliam, 2007). Hobson et al. (2003, p. 5) identify the following challenges encountered by beginning principals within the theme of Technical and Managerial Skills: managing the school budget, dealing with ineffective staff, implementing government and system initiatives. Whilst the beginning principal is typically well placed to lead the school educationally, the Technical and Managerial Skills required for the role often create frustration and stress for the new leader.

There are two facets implicit in the theme of Socialisation. Firstly, Socialisation involves those skills that enable beginning principals to understand, contribute, participate and lead in the local school context. These skills entail the successful immersion of the principal into the social mores of the school community. Secondly,

socialisation skills support the enculturation of the principal into the professional life of the educational leader. Daresh (2006) suggests that a socialisation problem faced by many new principals is to discover the culture of principalship as a career. That is, new principals need “to understand the big picture of how principals are supposed to act, what they are supposed to know, and even what they are supposed to do” (p.11). Many new principals can become so focused on surviving their first years on the job that they often ignore the importance of exploring what is happening in the professional world outside their school (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003).

The theme of Self-Awareness explores the integration of the role of principalship *per se*, with one’s own self identity. An essential element in any integration is to identify important personal and professional values before even walking into the principal’s office (Daresh, 2006). Beginning principals also need to realise that they have moved from a position of subordination to one of being in charge. Their new position often means that they receive signals from colleagues, staff, parents, students and other community members that they are somehow different because they are the boss (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). Linked with this change in status is the fact, that irrespective of the size of their school, they are ultimately responsible for the effective running of the school (Daresh, p. 141). Furthermore, as principals assume the leadership role of the school community, they need to appreciate that such leadership has an element of isolation, and hence, loneliness. The need for personal resilience is required to contend with this isolation, tensions of staff interactions and a variety of problems encountered (Clarke, Wildy and Pepper, 2007).

Context

The governance structure of Catholic education in Western Australia is unique within Australia. The five diocesan bishops of Western Australia have delegated authority to the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA) for the oversight of Catholic education. The Executive arm of the CECWA is the Catholic Education Office (CEOWA). Responsibility for overseeing the 158 schools (8400 school staff educating 71 000 students) lies with the Director of Catholic Education and the CEOWA. The operating framework for the CECWA and the CEOWA is the joint statement made by the bishops contained within the document entitled the Mandate (Hickey, Bianchini, Saunders, Holohan, and Sproxtton, 2009). The Mandate outlines the expectations of the Bishops with regard to the running of their Catholic schools. More specifically, the Mandate articulates the role Catholic school leaders have in ensuring the schools’ Catholic identity, the educational focus, the stewardship of resources and the communal emphasis.

Methodology

This qualitative research sought to identify the professional and personal needs of beginning principals in Catholic schools in Western Australia within the first five years of their principalship. Specifically, principals appointed for the first time from 2003 – 2008 were invited into this study. From a potential cohort of thirty principals, thirteen chose to participate. These included four secondary school principals, eight primary school principals and one principal of a composite school (K-10). Eight of the principals were female and five were male. Four of the schools were situated in the Perth metropolitan region (Archdiocese of Perth), six in the country (1 from the Geraldton diocese and 5 from the Bunbury diocese), and three were located in remote areas (Broome diocese). An outline of the participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: *Outline of the Participants*

	Male	Female	Total
Secondary	2	2	4
Primary	2	6	8
Composite	1	0	1
<hr/>			
Metropolitan	2	2	4
Country	1	5	6
Remote	2	1	3

Where possible, the principals were interviewed at their school location. Each principal participated in an hour-long semi-structured interview. The interview questions focused on the four areas by which Catholic school principals are appointed to the role. These areas of leadership are theological, pastoral, educational and administrative. The interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed verbatim. The principals were then presented with their transcription for final comments. The findings from the interviews are presented under the three headings of Technical and Managerial Skills, Socialisation, and Self-Awareness.

Technical and Managerial Skills

Under the theme of Technical and Managerial Skills, the key challenge emerging from the data was that of the role of administrator. Captured under this umbrella term were issues dealing with the financial requirements of running a school, human resourcing issues, and the external accountabilities that government (local, state and federal) and the Catholic education system placed on the principal.

The financial management challenged all participants. This was primarily due to a lack of understanding and inexperience in dealing with multimillion-dollar facilities and salaries. One participant stated “the area of finance really weighs me down; it takes me away from other areas that are my expertise.” A second observed: “For me (the challenge) is the whole new area of school boards and to be fully cognisant of the financial management of the school.” This particular participant added: “I recognise (finance) as a deficiency in my understanding... the reality is that you are running a multimillion dollar budget which you are responsible for.” A third participant captured the feeling by stating: “I think that the financials are the biggest area of poor understanding (for beginning principals).”

Recruitment, management and make up of staff created a great deal of consternation amongst all participants. The experience of dealing with difficult school personnel is captured by two participants who had to deal with major staffing issues that have required industrial and legal support from the CEOWA. One of these issues involved criminal charges being brought to bear on a staff member. The other issue involved placing a staff member on a summative appraisal. Both participants believed that these staffing issues were extremely difficult situations causing a great deal of personal strain on their lives. In fact, both remarked that these were the worst situations either had encountered. As one pointed out, “It was exceptionally hard. It was really tough for our community. The staff ebbed and flowed. I never want to go through that again.”

System and government accountabilities also consumed a great deal of the participants' time. The escalating administrative role the principal has in leading the school was a constant theme of the participants. All acknowledged the increasing time spent on meeting system and government demands, which, as new principals, they found quite taxing. The following example captured the sentiment of all participants. This participant stated that she had received a request from the CEOWA to complete an information technology audit in the last week of the school year. She noted:

The turnaround time was extremely short. I don't think that there is any understanding of the enormous amount of work that is required at the end of the school year (by the CEOWA). I know that this is to do with Kevin Rudd's IT funding. I had to ask the exhausted IT staff to assist in this request.

This participant observed that administrative requirements "have blown out of proportion over the years", it weighs her down, and that it "takes up a lot of (her) time."

Socialisation

Underpinning the theme of Socialisation is the cultural and personal relationships inherent in the role of principalship. The data revealed three dominant findings: mentoring, collegial support, and system support.

All beginning principals were greatly encouraged to pursue leadership positions by their former principals. A number of participants commented on the significance of being mentored by previous principals throughout their professional life. Being recognised and nurtured as potential leaders by their school principals enhanced their desire towards attaining a principalship. As one commented, "I worked with principals who were very quick to identify the strengths in people and develop their strengths and utilize them. That is basically how I came into the role."

Participants acknowledged the importance of collegial support as they entered the principalship. Each participant had a designated peer mentor. The general preference was to have this person visit their school and spend time in the community as a way of understanding their specific context. Participants believed that this visitation would enable their peer mentor to give contextually specific advice. Participants in rural and remote areas were particularly adamant. They collectively believed that a firsthand understanding of the context and needs of their school communities would have enhanced the quality of support from their peer mentors. One participant stated:

It would be good to have an experienced principal come into the school for one day a week over a term to actually discuss issues on the spot or to present scenarios with outcomes. I would have benefitted from this.

Another reiterated this belief: "When the mentor comes and visits the school, the person works in the local environment and gets to understand this context."

There were mixed responses from the participants about the respective principal associations. The secondary participants all commented on varying degrees of support from the Catholic Secondary Principals' Association (CSPA) as they began their principalship. As one participant remarked:

Being a new principal on the block you are never made to feel that you have to sit in the corner. This is very good about our system. You become part of a collegial group – it doesn't matter if you have been in the role for 20 years or one year – your voice and your concerns are just as important.

There was a modified response from the primary participants about the Catholic Primary Principals' Association (CPPA). One participant stated:

I feel that the association is reasonably interested in what we are doing. They are trying to support country principals. I had a city principal release one of their teachers to come up here because they knew I was teaching pretty much full time.

However, she qualified this statement by adding: "I think that we are not there yet and they (CPPA) can offer more support."

The participants also highlighted the significance of system support and guidance offered by the CEOWA. The ongoing support the CEOWA provided newly appointed principals was greatly appreciated. In particular, the tangible support the Principal School Advisor and regional consultants offered to the country school was acknowledged as being critically important. One participant, who struggled with providing key pedagogical development for her staff, greatly appreciated the professional advice and practical support. She stated, "she was outstanding and very supportive...she went into classes and modelled for them, listened to them... they didn't feel checked up on and were very comfortable with her."

Self-Awareness

The theme of Self-Awareness reflected participants' greater understanding of self within the role of the principalship. All participants believed that their commitment to their faith and desire to lead a faith-based school were important. The majority of participants have only taught within Catholic education in Western Australia, however, all commented on their strong desire to educate within a faith based school. This centrality of their faith in their leadership role was a common belief held by all participants. As one stated:

I had a Catholic upbringing and went to Catholic schools. It is just part of who I am. I have never ever considered not being in a Catholic school. Being able to lead a faith community in a small town is a privilege. If I am instrumental in instilling the life of Jesus into the life of children, what more is there?

Another commented, "I think that it's the fact that you can express your faith ... you can talk about your faith ... you can help young people develop their faith. These are very important and special to me." A third noted that through her principalship, she had personally grown in her faith: "I feel that I have grown in wisdom and the experience has made me look at my relationship with God."

Areas of resiliency and the need for strong support networks were also commented upon. All participants believed that new principals have to be resilient to deal with the demands of the role. One participant remarked on the need for a certain level of toughness. She stated, "Be prepared to be well and truly knocked off your perch. You have to be well and truly resilient." Another recognised that while the work presented challenges, it was important to have a balanced perspective. She commented:

What doesn't kill you only makes you stronger. This has been my mantra all year. I think that this is one of the kinks in the road and I will get around it or go through it. I am pretty resilient.

This participant believed that resiliency was developed through "keeping things in balance".

The geographical isolation of the schools created feelings of both professional and personal loneliness. The country and remote participants expressed the isolation experienced due to decision-making and dealing with sensitive matters. As one participant stated:

The buck stops with me... I don't have anyone here to talk professionally about sensitive issues. Confidentiality is the issue. When you are in a two

teacher school, it is very hard. I want to protect the confidentiality of the situation.

Another participant commented on the professional isolation, highlighting difficulties of travel and cost in attending professional development. A third participant commented: "Leaving the community for PD causes me stress and worry. Not having someone to rely on and take over while I am away is problematic." She added: "when someone did take over, there were more issues to deal with upon my return."

Participants also reported on the shock and realisation of the demanding nature and pace of the principal's role. One participant stated: "The sheer volume of work is a lowlight ... and my time management becomes an issue." Another observed: "The job can be all consuming."

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to explore the professional and personal needs of beginning principals in Catholic schools in Western Australia. The findings from the study were categorised under three themes. The first of these themes, Technical and Managerial Skills, highlighted issues dealing with the financial requirements of running a school, human resource management, and the external accountabilities that government (local, state and federal) and the Catholic education system placed on the principal. The second theme of Socialisation drew attention to the needs of beginning principals for collegial support, mentoring, and system support. The third theme, Self-Awareness, dealt with matters of personal faith, the importance of resiliency, professional and geographical isolation, and the demands of the role.

Five recommendations emerge from the findings. First, there is a need for the Catholic Education Office to build the capacity of aspiring principals in the area of technical and managerial skills, in particular, finance, resource and people management. Second, current principals have a critical role to encourage and nurture aspiring leaders from their teaching staff, and provide these potential leaders with leadership opportunities. Third, principal mentors should have, as far as possible, a contextual understanding of the beginning principal's school situation. Principal colleagues who have a familiarity with the geographical context provide contextually specific advice. Fourth, principal associations have an important support role to ensure that the professional needs of beginning principals are met. Such support has the potential to counter the geographical, professional and personal isolation experienced by many beginning principals. Finally, The CEOWA and principal mentors need to proactively support beginning principals in meeting system and government accountability demands. The purpose of this support is to alleviate stress and confusion by ensuring that accountabilities are met in a timely and coordinated manner.

The beginning Catholic school principal has a demanding and challenging role. The Bishops of Western Australia acknowledge this fact and affirm all principals in their role of leading the Catholic school. As they state: "the contributions of our Catholic leaders to the life and mission of the Church are examples of God's presence in our schools. We value their generosity and willingness in the fulfilment of our responsibilities regarding Catholic schools" (Hickey et al., 2009, p.43). Given the importance of the role, and the obvious demands that beginning principals face, it is essential that procedures are established (or finetuned) to ensure beginning principals receive appropriate preparation, support and guidance.

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