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What are the professional and personal needs of beginning Western Australian Catholic school principals during the first four years of their appointment?

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Chapter Seven: Review and Conclusions

7.1 Purpose of the research

The purpose of this research was to explore the professional and personal needs of newly appointed principals of Catholic schools in Western Australia. Specifically, the research focused on the professional and personal needs of 13 beginning principals. The case study explored three perspectives relating to beginning principals, namely: gender, school location and school type. Foundational to this purpose was the view that school principals have a significant influence on student educational outcomes (Hattie, 2009; Robinson et al., 2013). Simply stated: quality leadership brings about quality educational outcomes for young people (Chapman, 2005). It is necessary, therefore, to develop and support beginning principals so that they can provide excellent educational opportunities for young people.

7.2 Design of the research

The theoretical framework underpinning this research drew from a qualitative approach utilising interpretivism as its theoretical perspective. The interpretivist lens which this research used was that of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism was chosen because it highlights the perspectives of individuals and the meanings individual attach to interactions and events (Clarke, 2000). The methodology employed in this research was that of an instrumental case study which sought to highlight the perceptions, both professional and personal, of beginning principals. In order to examine these perceptions, three research perspectives were covered: gender, school location and school type. Three specific research questions were investigated to explicate the three perspectives. The specific research questions were:

1. What technical and managerial skills do beginning principals need to acquire?

2. What cultural and personal relationships do beginning principals need to develop?

3. In what ways do beginning principals integrate the role of principalship with their self-awareness?

The methods of data collection included semi-structured interviews, document search and researcher field notes. The analysis of the data applied the framework developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). This interactive model of data management and display consisted of three processes: data reduction, data display and drawing and verifying conclusions. The discussion found in Chapter Six drew from the analysis of the data and critical reflection of the relevant literature. The following section addresses the response to the specific research questions proposed by this research.

7.3   Research questions answered

7.3.1 *What technical and managerial skills do beginning principals need to acquire?*

The findings of the research suggest that the technical and managerial skills required for beginning principals lay within four areas, namely, financial management, dealing with staffing issues, meeting bureaucratic demands and the transition process into the leadership role. These areas will now be explained.

The first technical and managerial skills area which the beginning principals recognised was in the area of financial management. The beginning principals collectively reported that they struggled with understanding the financial processes required of running a school. The beginning principals acknowledged that they need to become familiar with financial resourcing in order to run multi-million dollar school operations.

The second technical and managerial skills area beginning principal's identified concerned staffing. Here, beginning principals noted three main concerns: the recruitment of suitably qualified school staff, building staff capacity and management of under-performing staff. Beginning principals recognised the need for attracting new staff who were experienced and capable. They recognised that in order to provide students with the best educational outcomes, they needed to develop professionally their staff. A final skills area the beginning principals commented on with regards to staffing was how to deal with under-performing staff. Beginning principals recognised that they were not fully equipped to deal with poor performing staff.

The third technical and managerial skills area identified by the beginning principals was that of meeting the bureaucratic needs of system and governments. The new leaders reported that the time demands placed on meeting accountabilities to multiple masters left little time for what they believed was their core work as principal, namely, leading teaching and learning. Beginning principals noted that they needed skills to manage time more effectively and discern high order tasks from less important ones.

The final area within technical and managerial skills that the beginning principals identified lay in the process of transitioning to principalship. Beginning principals reported that the handover they encountered with the exiting principal was an inadequate process and required more structure and organisation. Beginning principals recognised the importance of preparing themselves for the handover with the exiting principals in order to make the transition into principal of the new school a smooth one.

7.3.2 What cultural and personal skills do beginning principals need to develop?

The beginning principals identified three areas relating to the cultural and personal skills required of them for effective leadership. These three areas involved socialisation skills that enhanced their political and contextual awareness, the development of community engagement strategies and the need to augment collegial relationships.

The first cultural and personal skill area that beginning principals identified related to developing political and contextual awareness. The beginning principals who began their principalship in rural or remote locations noted that their school context was located within a broader local community that included the parish. In order for the beginning principal to lead within the school community and participate actively in the local community and parish, it was important that he or she understood the socio, cultural, political and communal milieu and mores. Beginning remote and rural principal's recognised the importance of developing professional sensitivity to the school's cultural context in order to enhance their awareness to the needs of the school and the broader community.

The second cultural and personal area that the beginning principal's highlighted was the potential demands placed upon new leaders when participating in the broader local community. Whilst beginning principals noted the value of the school in the local community, some experienced excessive demands placed upon their time by both local and parish communities. The beginning principals recognised that they needed to balance school, personal and communal responsibilities in order to be an effective school leader.

The third cultural and personal skills area identified by beginning principals focussed on the importance of building strong collegial relationships. The beginning principals recognised their principal colleagues as an important source for support, advice and encouragement in understanding the role requirements of leading a school. An important socialisation skill recognised by the beginning principals was augmenting relationships with local Catholic school principals and other like schools. By doing so they could enhance collaboration, improve problem-solving skills and view different perspectives on educational issues.

7.3.3 *In what ways do beginning principals integrate their role of principalship with their self-awareness?*

The beginning principals identified three areas that they needed to develop in order to integrate the role of principalship with their self–awareness. These areas were the importance of faith development in their principalship, the importance of self–reflection in building their leadership capacity and the importance of being resilient in order to deal with the burgeoning demands of principalship.

Firstly, the majority of beginning principals identified the importance of faith development in their vocational call to Catholic school principalship as a key role of integrating the principalship with their own sense of self-awareness. The majority of beginning principals' firmly believed in the need to serve and lead within a faith-based context. The principals' personal assent to the Catholic faith was publically manifested in the religious dimension of their leadership. Beginning principals recognised the need to persist with nurturing their faith while at the same time being ever mindful of the influence they have in the faith development of their school community.

The beginning principals highlighted the importance of self-reflecting on their leadership as the second area of integrating the principal's role with their sense of self-awareness. The new leaders recognised that spending time reflecting on their actions and decisions assisted them in moderating their behaviours. In particular, this skill of self–reflection provides the new leader with the opportunity to be attuned to the influential nature of the principalship.

Beginning principals recognised the need for skill development in the area of resiliency in order to meet the demands of principalship as a third area of integrating the principal's role with their sense of self-awareness. The beginning principals reported on the challenges of the principalship. These challenges included feelings of loneliness, isolation and anxiety in meeting the burgeoning demands and accountabilities. In addition, they noted the importance of managing work–life balance issues. Beginning principals need to develop their resiliency skills to counter these onerous challenges. These skills will build the leadership capacity of beginning principal, enabling them to deal with complex and challenging tasks with confidence and success.

7.4 Conclusion

This study was concerned with exploring the professional and personal needs of beginning principals in Western Australian Catholic schools. The motivation behind the study was to understand the needs of beginning principals in order to consider ways the Catholic education system could develop and support its new leaders. In bringing to the fore their challenges and issues, the study sought to identify ways to nurture new leaders in meeting these challenges and concerns encountered in the initial years of principalship.

7.5 Implications for the profession

The findings from the study have implications for the following groups or individuals:

1. Bishops and parish communities

2. Catholic Education Office in Western Australia

3. University programs related to school leadership programs

4. Principal associations and current experienced and successful principals

5. Aspirant principals

6. Other researchers

The bishops are the employers of principals in Western Australian Catholic schools in the dioceses in which the school is located. The bishops require their school principals to integrate successfully the missionary priority of the Catholic Church with the secular educational demands and priorities of the state and federal governments. The findings from this study provide bishops with an insight into how their principals are dealing with their first years of principalship. The study's findings, therefore, have implications for bishops and parishes with regards to supporting the needs of beginning principals. Bishops and parish priests need to nurture the faith of beginning principals as a matter of priority; the principal's role as a religious leader in the school community requires them to be confident in themselves and secure within their faith. The research suggests that parish priests and the parish community have a role to play in supporting and nurturing the faith of beginning principals. Key to this role of support is the need for the bishop and parish priests to monitor the demands placed upon the new leaders and to provide opportunities for faith formation.

The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, as the executive arm of the CECWA and therefore, of the bishops, is required to ensure that the quality of leaders and potential leaders is nurtured and developed. The nurturing and developing of beginning principals will then in turn provide the best educational outcomes for young people and support the missionary purpose of the Catholic Church. The findings from this study provide evidence of the needs, both professional and personal, of beginning principals. In order for the CEOWA to recruit and support those new to principalship, leadership preparation programs are required, which accurately reflect the skills required of Catholic leaders.

Tertiary providers, who offer programs in school leadership development, need to consider the findings of this research in order to provide learning opportunities for potential school leaders that hone in on appropriate and relevant understandings for contemporary school principalship. Such understandings might include interpersonal skills, communication skills, organisational development and conflict resolution. Principal associations have a significant part to play in the support of beginning principals. Findings of this research suggest that a more coordinated and active mentoring of beginning principals by current successful principals is central to developing and sustaining these new leaders. In addition, this research highlighted the role of experienced principals in building the leadership capacity of current teachers, particularly women, and encouraging them to aspire for principalship. Such an action is crucial for succession planning for school principalship.

This study has relevance to those considering principalship. This research offers first hand stories of beginning principals. In particular, this research provides aspirants with

the reality of the school leadership, its joys and pitfalls. The findings highlight areas that aspirants need to consider, develop and practice in order to be a Catholic school principal. For instance, the following areas that challenged beginning principals include financial management; staff recruitment, development and performance management; community engagement; political and cultural sensitivities; and personal and faith development. Amidst the challenges and issues that confronted the new leader, a foundational characteristic of all participants was their desire to serve as a leader in Catholic education. The vocational call for these participants should provide aspirants with an understanding of what Catholic school principalship is fundamentally about, namely, the school's support in the missionary purpose of the Church.

For researchers interested in the professional and personal needs of beginning principals, this study provides a foundation for further research. It would be worthwhile replicating the study in other educational sectors and systems within Western Australia, across Catholic education systems in other states and territories and internationally. Comparative case studies across educational systems and sectors would provide a more in-depth analysis of the professional and personal needs of beginning principals.

7.6   Recommendations

Six recommendations are drawn from the findings of this study. These recommendations are now presented.

Firstly, the CECWA and CEOWA adopt a rural and remote lens when developing and implementing policies for Catholic education. Such a lens would ensure that the impact of such policies would be cognisant of the limitations encountered by beginning

principals who lead in rural and remote locations. These limitations include limited access to professional support in implementing changes to policies and practices; inexperience of the principal in delivering system changes; and the limited number of experienced staff in small schools who could effect change and meet accountability requirements posed by the system and governments.

Secondly, leadership preparation programs for aspiring principals need to emphasise the technical and managerial skills necessary for the operational requirements of running a school. These types of skills include financial management, and recruitment and development of school staff. In addition, leadership preparation programs need to develop the aspirant's awareness of the micro-politics that exist within the school and the broader community. The development of the abovementioned skills will assist aspiring principals in understanding the transactional areas of school principalship.

Thirdly, principal preparation programs need to have differentiated elements to cater for gender, school location and school type. Specifically, it is essential that the content of principal preparation programs be differentiated to meet the diverse needs of the participants, the variety of school contexts and locations, and the particularities associated with leading primary and secondary schools. This differentiation of content will ensure that the principals programs are better designed to contribute to the individual and collective needs of beginning principals.

Fourthly, principal associations should consider a more consistent and targeted focus on the needs of beginning principals as a matter of priority. Associations are recommended to establish networks for beginning principals to ascertain what their particular

challenges and needs are, and then facilitate opportunities to strategize around these concerns. Associations are encouraged to collaborate with the CEOWA in catering for the professional and personal needs of beginning principals. A joint focus would benefit the Catholic education system enormously as it will support current and future beginning principals.

Fifthly, the CEOWA needs to facilitate the development of an enculturation program for school boards and parishes that bring into focus the needs of beginning principals. The program's content should consider developing the new leader's profile within the local community that is commensurate with managing a healthy work–life balance. The program should be developed with input from beginning principals, community and parish personnel and school staff.

Finally, the CEOWA needs to introduce appropriate faith formation activities specifically designed to nurture the faith of beginning principals. Activities such as spiritual retreats, faith renewal programs and sabbatical opportunities can provide the beginning principal with the time and opportunity to reflect; to become more attuned to their vocational call and strengthen their resolve to contribute to the Church's mission; and to nourish their spiritual needs.

7.7 Addendum

The research has already made some impact. As a result of this study, the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia has moved to adopt changes to the existing leadership preparation programs. Firstly, these changes include the participation of aspiring principals with school boards. This participation exposes the aspiring principal

to governance and community awareness issues. Secondly, a number of CEOWA beginning principals leadership programs have now adopted the use of factual school data. These data includes school financials, budgets, capital development plans and staff accreditation details. The use of real data provide program participants with the opportunity to understand the fiscal, resource and personnel context of individual schools situations. Thirdly, as a consequence of this study, there has been further refinement of the handover processes between the exiting and incumbent beginning principals. This process has enabled the beginning principal to be better equipped to transition into the school at the start of his or her contract with sound working knowledge of the school's operation.

7.8   Personal impact statement

This research has had a significant impact on me. The motivation for the study was drawn from spending time with beginning principals and listening to their stories of challenge and joy. These interactions highlighted the imperative for appropriate professional and personal support for beginning principals. Such support not only enables beginning principals to lead their school communities more successfully in its educational endeavours, but also to flourish in their vocational call. This research has enabled me, as a member of the Executive who leads Catholic Education in Western Australia, to provide a voice for beginning principals at the executive discussion table. Examples of discussions in which I have contributed include the following: development of leadership preparation programs; impact of policies and practices on rural and remote schools; challenges in embracing accountabilities to system and government and the well-being of beginning principals per se.