Leading beyond the Black Stump: District support for principals in remote settings of Western Australia

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Abstract

Drawing from the research we have conducted into the principalship over more than a decade, this paper examines how one education district supports principals of small schools located in rural and remote environments in their pursuit of school improvement. This district is characterized by its magnitude, its diversity of landscapes and the remoteness of its hinterland. As such, it provides rich insights into innovative strategies that can assist principals in making a difference to the performance and vitality of rural/remote/isolated schools and the communities they serve.

Key words

District leadership, Principals, Schools, Remote

Introduction

For about a decade, we have been involved in research focussing on the principalship with the general aim of analysing ways in which principals can work more effectively within the realities of schools as complex organisations. In keeping with this agenda, some of our most recent work has targeted beginning principals of small rural and remote primary schools in the West Australian (and Queensland) government sectors. The complexity of leadership in small, rural and remote schools and the national imperative that all students should be successful, regardless of their location, make these settings especially pertinent to the pursuit of sustainable school improvement. Our research, so far, has placed the emphasis on the principalship itself and has sought to identify and conceptualise a range of influences on the work of teaching principals within the contexts of their communities in order to inform processes for their preparation and development. Most recently, through the International Study of Principals Preparation (ISPP, http://www.ucalgary.ca/~cwebber/ISPP/index.htm) we have sought to investigate the extent to which principals perceive their preparation aligns with their professional needs in their first year of appointment. Although these considerations have inevitable implications for district level and district wide endeavours to improve schools, we have not devoted attention exclusively to the role of the District in providing strategies enabling leaders in small rural/remote schools to be as effective as possible. Indeed, according to Anderson (2003), there has been an upsurge in attention devoted to school districts because of increased accountability demands placed on schools and an acknowledgement that district influence is unavoidable if not desirable. More recently, Leithwood (2010) has also suggested that, at least in the United States, school districts have been rediscovered for the role they can play in school reform.
Putting the focus on the district rather than the school

This section of the paper presents a brief case study of one education district in Western Australia with a view to highlighting the impact the district can have in creating the conditions for leaders in small rural/remote schools to be as effective as possible in pursuing school improvement. As Mangin has pointed out (2007, p.33), the district constitutes an important social context that can influence what principals know and how they use their knowledge.

Western Australia constitutes one third of the land mass of the country and has a population of around 2 million of whom 1.5 million people live in the capital city of Perth. For the administration of public education in this vast state, the Education Department of Western Australia (WADoE) currently divides its jurisdiction into 14 Education Districts. These districts are charged with the main responsibility of delivering quality services to schools so that student outcomes are enhanced. The Education District which constitutes the case study described in this paper was selected because it is characterized by its magnitude, its diversity of landscapes and the remoteness of its hinterland. As such, the District contains a sizable proportion of small, rural/remote schools. It also embraces environments that exhibit the very challenges intrinsic to leading these schools that have been identified earlier in the chapter. Another reason we selected this education district was its reputation for innovative strategies in supporting principals in their work. The data for this case study were collected by means of relevant artefacts such as policy documents, web sites, performance data and statistical information, all of which are available in the public domain. In order to protect the anonymity of the District in question, these artefacts have not been referenced directly in the case account. Data collection also entailed one in-depth interview with a Director of Schools. The interview was designed to elicit the issues and influences that principals of small schools face in pursuit of school improvement, the nature of the context within which these issues and influences arise and the strategies adopted by the District in order to promote school improvement and support principals in their work as well as the reasons for adopting these strategies. These considerations also provide a structure for describing the case to which we now turn our attention.

The context

The Education District under discussion embraces a diversity of environments. Typical of the more remote hinterland of the region, however, is the presence of small communities and towns, mining leases, pastoral properties as well as Indigenous out stations. The diversity of the physical environment is matched by the diversity of the people. Many areas of the District as a whole are inhabited by both Indigenous and non-indigenous people and in some places Indigenous people and families predominate. Not surprisingly, it is these more remote contexts that present the greatest challenges for leading small schools and for this reason, the case study concentrates most of its attention on such settings.

The issues and influences that principals of small schools face in many parts of this Education District tend to be characteristic of remote environments throughout Australia and present a graphic illustration of Barty and colleagues’ observation (2005) about the unevenness of students’ academic and social achievements in rural/remote schools and the high rates of absenteeism. In some parts of the District, School Attendance Monitoring data indicate that large

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³ We are indebted District Office personnel for their support in the writing of this paper
proportions of students attend school for less than 80 per cent of the time. It should be emphasized, however, that these data are not disaggregated for small schools. No doubt, closely aligned with the issue of low student attendance in these areas of the District is the poor performance of many students on standardized testing in literacy and numeracy. In some instances, there is a disconcertingly high number of students who are deemed ‘at risk’ in reading, writing, language conventions and numeracy.

As we have already remarked, the nature of the community in which many small schools are located can often hinder school improvement initiatives. In some areas of the District, the community might be in a perpetual state of chaos as longstanding family feuding disrupts the day-to-day functioning of the school. In these settings there may also be little parental engagement with the school because of a profound mistrust of the education being offered. In the more agricultural areas of the District, which also contain a number of small schools, it is the conservative mores of the community that are likely to compound the difficulties of enacting school improvement and require considerable savoir faire from principals in their interactions with community issues.

These intractable problems besetting education in many small schools, especially in the more remote settings of the District, represent what Fullan (2005, p. 53) portrays as ‘adaptive problems’. These are the kinds of problems for which we do not have ready answers and which take time to deal with. Fullan describes these as ‘politically charged, because solutions are difficult to discern and learn and some disequilibrium on the way to addressing the problem is inevitable’ (p. 54).

Dealing with such problems within the District is made more difficult, however, by several of the issues that have already been highlighted in the chapter. Many of the principals who are grappling with such complex matters are inexperienced, at least at the level of initiating, implementing and sustaining school improvement of the order required by the prevailing circumstances. Furthermore, teachers too are often inexperienced and at the start of their careers.

One of the main reasons for the rawness of many of the personnel involved in small, remote schools in this District is that these schools tend to be ‘difficult to staff’. In spite of additional compensation provided to principals and teachers for living in remote areas, it is often hard to attract personnel to these locations. Moreover, when new principals and teachers arrive at a school, they do not always expect to stay for long. Contiguously, a chronic shortage of relief (substitute) teachers makes staffing arrangements in many schools fragile and hinders opportunities for off-site professional development. In this connection, it should also be pointed out that in some parts of the District it is frequently necessary for principals to travel at least three hours with an overnight stay in order to attend meetings.

**Strategies for school improvement**

Given the District’s mission to deliver ‘quality’ services to schools for enhancing student outcomes, a repertoire of strategies has been adopted in order to support principals in their pursuit of school improvement surrounded by such challenging circumstances. These strategies are predicated on five foundational beliefs:

- All students can be capable, independent learners
• Parents and communities want their children to be successful learners
• Indigenous staff are the bridge to culture, community and learning
• With the right support, knowledge, skills and resources teachers can improve student learning
• Highly effective principals are instructional leaders

The importance of these foundational beliefs lies in establishing a clear moral purpose that drives the District’s strategies and is predicated on the desire to improve students’ lives through learning.

In addition, the strategies have been forged out of consultation with key stakeholders including communities, principals, Indigenous staff, teachers and support staff. The process of consultation has elicited a broad spectrum of views about what is expected from schools in the District ensuring that school improvement processes are attuned to multiple bandwidths across communities. It has also generated a level of agreement regarding the strategies for action that is more likely to result in support for their implementation (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Indeed, the articulation of the beliefs went through several iterations before they became acceptable to stakeholders, a process that was beneficial in bringing various parties closer together to create a shared sense of purpose.

The strategies that are most pertinent to small, remote schools in the District are oriented around the following themes: positive relationships between students, families, schools and community; programmes that engage students to improve achievement and attendance; knowledge of teaching and learning involving strategies leading to improved literacy and numeracy; and well coordinated inter-agency collaboration at a local level to address the needs of students and their families.

The development of positive relationships between students, families, schools and community is based on the belief that, ideally, these stakeholders should have some input into the educational programs and processes that are initiated and implemented in their schools, especially relating to approaches adopted for enriching learning and dealing with student behaviour. Collaboration of this kind within the school is complemented, however, by collaboration between schools. Clustering of small schools, for example, can lead to a reduction in isolation of staff as well as allowing professional interaction and a sharing of resources for mutual benefit. Networking opportunities have been established, therefore, to support Indigenous staff, principals, teachers, and support staff located in the more remote areas of the District.

Related to these considerations is the strategy of implementing programmes that are most likely to engage students for improving their achievement as well as their attendance. Principals and teachers in small and remote schools who are effective leaders of learning use pedagogies that are grounded in local needs and interests. In particular, approaches to teaching, learning and assessment that encourage student-centred and community-oriented learning seem to be effective. To this end, a number of pertinent programmes have been introduced based on collaboration with communities and interagency partnerships. For example, a Football Academy programme, an Arts programme involving a local theatre company, playgroups for years 0-4,
before and after school programmes, such as ‘breakfast club’, homework programmes, and sport, a Science outreach project involving school visits by staff from the Australian Commonwealth Scientific and Research Organization (CSIRO) to provide class lessons on astronomy and night star gazing, and family workshops that focus on improving outcomes for students.

Most importantly, programmes place a heavy emphasis on improving literacy and numeracy, which are informed by relevant knowledge of teaching and learning. This engenders a minimum of eighty per cent of instructional time (years 1-3), and fifty per cent (years 4-12) being devoted to literacy and numeracy. Teaching and learning are strengthened further by integrating literacy and numeracy with community-based learning within the curriculum.

Programmes that are designed to enhance literacy and numeracy outcomes are bolstered by well-coordinated interagency collaboration at a local level to accommodate the needs of students and their families. For example, collaborations have been forged between relevant authorities such as the Department of Child Protection, the Health Department and the Police Department. These collaborations have yielded the provision of comprehensive hearing screening for students by the Health Department and the development of intervention plans. Also, in some communities where children might be contending with exceptionally abusive circumstances at home, the Police and Department of Child Protection are working with schools to make informal contact with students for creating harmonious and trusting relationships and encourage disclosure. This kind of partnership between health and community services, welfare and education can evolve into extended models of schooling which are capable of promoting greater community engagement in educational achievement and assist overcoming disadvantage in the school community.

Professional support

The repertoire of strategies pursued by the District to enhance the vitality of small schools in remote locations and the communities which they serve require considerable professional support. Particularly germane to this chapter is the employment of mentor principals and expert teachers. The role of the mentor principal is to work in partnership with principals in clusters of schools to develop and implement strategies that have been identified above. For this purpose, the mentor principal supports school principals to become instructional leaders, with the main goals of improving literacy and numeracy, behavior and attendance. It is not entirely clear how ‘instructional leadership’ is defined but it is implied that ideally the principal’s role should move towards a deeper involvement in the core business of teaching and learning. More specifically, mentor principals provide guidance on raising community engagement in education, establishing collaborative partnerships with mining, local business and other agencies, assist principals and schools in strategic development and planning and change management processes and where appropriate, enhance the capacity of Indigenous staff as leaders and cultural experts in the school.

Although in Western Australia, there is no formal or specific preparation for the principalship, inductions are organized for principals at the District Office, three to four weeks after they have taken up their appointment. These inductions are normally held over three days and in some parts of the District, principals new to the area are required to attend the remote graduate teacher induction for two days prior to the beginning of the school year. It is emphasized very strongly that principals’ learning is ‘not an event, but a journey’, and connected with ongoing processes of leadership development described above. For new principals, who are often those appointed to
small schools, the induction programme focuses mainly on the so-called ‘rules of engagement’, in other words, those technical matters such as financial management, duty of care, and occupational health and safety. The District Office’s awareness of the challenges of the principalship is demonstrated by the attention that is also given in the induction process to ‘self-care’.

In the wake of the principal induction programme, the District Office’s principal consultants make contact with new principals and visit their schools. They also make themselves accessible by telephone/email contact. Furthermore, all first time principals in the District are allocated a trained ‘professional’ coach. These coaches are selected by district personnel according to their knowledge and skills in educational leadership. The arrangement is offered as a support provision and is not made mandatory. As such, new principals find the arrangement a helpful source of professional sustenance because it sits outside the usual line management processes. The District’s commitment to the coaching of new principals is highlighted by the considerable financial investment that is placed in training the coaches.

These support strategies are reinforced by instructionally focused professional learning to support principals and teachers. Pedagogies in small and remote schools are effective when teaching is informed by data - especially in low socio economic status (SES) environments. In these challenging circumstances, principals and teachers appear to benefit from plentiful opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills in using data for improving teaching and learning. Among the skills for using data is the capacity to scrutinize and evaluate information to ascertain how it fits with what is already known about the school context and how it can be used to implement improvements. More prosaically, perhaps, this approach is referred to as ‘lining up the ducks’ in the vernacular of the District’s language of professional learning. Lining up the ducks is based on responses to three questions: Have you got the data? What is the data telling you? And is your strategic planning aligned with what the data is telling you?

The opportunities for professional learning are made more plentiful by means of clustering arrangements. In keeping with the District’s quest to promote professional learning communities within schools and across schools, clusters have been encouraged in many parts of the District. These clusters are not necessarily restricted to small schools, but also include connections with larger schools. Clustering brings many benefits to small schools, such as making available to students a wider range of equipment, resources and expertise, fostering a broad sense of community, and reducing the insular nature of being part of a small school. The clusters tend to be driven by the principals, rather than the District, who capitalise on opportunities to visit other schools, share practice and exchange data. Such is the impact of these interactions that in some instances principals have decided to extend their appointments because of the professional stimulation they experience as well as associated feelings of worth and achievement.

**Discussion**

In the context of the school district’s role in educational change generally, Anderson (2005) has identified a number of strategic actions that are common to many successful districts in North America. Several of these strategic actions have been demonstrated in the case study described here and are especially pertinent to enabling leaders in small rural/remote schools to be as effective as possible in the pursuit of school improvement.
First, the District’s articulation of five foundational beliefs that underpin the implementation of strategic actions echo what Anderson (2003, p.8) describes as a ‘District-wide sense of efficacy’. In other words, district-level leaders evince a strong belief in the capacity of school personnel to achieve high standards of learning for all students, and high standards of teaching and leadership. It is, perhaps, this fundamental philosophy that serves as a catalyst for the District to make a positive impact on the efficacy of the education provided in its jurisdiction. As Waters and Marzano have suggested (2006, p.8), district leadership can make a difference and district office staff should not be summarily dismissed, as has often been the case in the past, as an anonymous bureaucracy standing in the way of progressive change.

Another strategy that has been associated with successful school districts (Anderson, 2003) that is particularly germane in the context of this paper is the investment the District makes in instructional leadership development at the school level; an investment reinforcing Leithwood’s observation (2010) that the role of superintendents (directors) is shifting from being an organizational manager to being an instructional leader. This strategy is most evident in the more remote areas of the District where students’ poor ‘academic’ performance can often be perplexing. These are also the areas, of course, in which many small schools are located. The investment in instructional leadership engenders priority being given to helping principals of these schools develop their expertise in evidence-informed decision-making for improving students’ literacy and numeracy. In this connection, Shen and Cooley’s observation (2008) that school leaders lack confidence in understanding and using data and tend to use data for ‘accounting’ purposes rather than for improving teaching and learning is poignant.

The investment in instructional leadership also extends to assisting principals to become skilled observers and interpreters of the quality and progress of teaching and learning, especially literacy and numeracy, in their schools. For this purpose, principals are learning how to engage their teachers in dialogues which start from an evidence base on student performance in relation to District/State standards and focus on the work that each teacher does in a classroom.

Furthermore, the District’s strategies recognise that principals alone cannot be expected to provide the magnitude of school-based professional support that teachers require in order to implement significant changes in practice and student learning in the classroom. To support this policy, new school-based teacher leader positions have been established to work closely with principals and with district consultants to provide professional development; for example specialist literacy teachers or coordinators.

Anderson also suggests (2003, p.12) that successful school districts are characterised by district-wide and school-level emphasis on teamwork and professional community. Engagement in professional communities, Leithwood has suggested (2010) builds the capacity of everyone involved including principals and district personnel to help colleagues develop agency in instructional leadership. Once again, this emphasis on teamwork and professional community is evident in the operations of clusters of schools which enable the sharing of expertise, and networking of principals and teachers.
Concluding comments

It seems clear that in the case of the District reported here, the role of providing ‘on the job’ support for principals, especially for those who are contending with the challenges of leading educational improvement in small rural/remote schools, is taken seriously. This commitment, of course, is a vital requirement to ensure that all schools build their capacity to be as effective as possible. It also indicates that the District is engaging in an approach to school improvement that Honig and her colleagues describe as ‘central office transformation’ (Honig et al, 2010, p.iii) rather than relying on more customary arrangements in district offices which tend to pursue ‘administration-as-usual’.

Notwithstanding some optimistic signs that education districts (at least in Western Australia) have recognized the need to support and develop principals’ agency in facilitating school improvement, we offer two suggestions for strengthening these processes, which have particular application to small, rural/remote schools. First, we suggest that dealing with the problems of small schools in remote areas of Australia is aided by continuous monitoring, assessment and reporting of the outcomes of actions that are implemented. In the case of the District described here, the strategies are at a relatively early stage of implementation, but their systematic evaluation in the long term is likely to present a clearer and more authoritative account of what works.

Our second suggestion relates to the vexed issue of initial preparation for the principalship. It will be noted that, understandably, the support provided by districts for principals tends to be ‘on the job’. It will also be apparent that some of the challenges surrounding the principalship that were highlighted in the earlier part of this chapter remain untapped by the strategies designed to help principals of small schools in their work. We argue, therefore, that although ‘on the job’ support is a crucial component of the professional formation of principals, it needs to be complemented by systematic and specific preparation for the role prior to appointment. We have asserted elsewhere (Clarke & Wildy, 2010; Wildy & Clarke, 2008) that there is no substitute for deep understanding of leadership concepts, a personal leadership philosophy or a thorough articulation of the links between theory and practice. Such knowledge and understanding are not learned by trial and error but by reading, reflection, writing, debate and critique in a scholarly manner over a prolonged period. Learning of this nature requires not only time, but also a certain distance from the practice of leadership. Hence, it is not only ongoing professional support from the District on the lines described in this chapter, but also leadership development programmes prior to appointment that are required. This is likely to be the right combination of professional sustenance that will assist in providing communities and particularly students from costal lush to burned red centre the quality of educational leadership they deserve.

Postscript

As this paper is being written the Department of Education in Western Australia is about to implement a new school support model throughout the State (The Government of Western Australia Department of Education, 2010). According to this model up to 75 school networks are to be created in 8 education regions across the State. These networks, as well as 8 regional
education offices and seven local education offices, will replace the 14 existing district education offices.

Each network will comprise up to 20 schools led by a ‘Network Principal’. This is a new position created to enable what are described as the ‘best’ principals to extend their influence and knowledge. Network Principals will still manage their own schools, but will be released to assist other principals in the network. In more remote areas, geographical isolation may mean principals will be employed on a full-time basis to support schools in networks across a region headed by a Regional Executive Director rather than being attached to a particular school.

The Education Department believes that there are several benefits to be derived from the new model of delivery of school support services. First, by locating the resources in schools or networks of schools principals are allowed to determine how support services are used. Secondly, the new school network structure emphasises and encourages a practitioner approach to support, providing flexibility to schools and networks enabling highly competent principals and teachers to help and support other staff. Thirdly, it is argued that the reduction in bureaucracy associated with this new structure will enable schools to respond more quickly and in more creative ways to future changes and opportunities in their local environments. Placing greater control of support services in the hands of principals and teachers is purported to ensure that support is better aligned to the specific needs of students and staff.

The new model of school support is not intended to start until mid 2011, so it is impossible at this stage to make any evaluation of its efficacy. What does seem to be clear, however, is that the capacity of the model to bring about school improvement, especially in remote parts of the State, will hinge to a great extent on the effectiveness of the network principals. These principals will have considerable responsibility for developing the degree of teamwork and professional community that are necessary to enable the sharing of expertise, and networking of principals and teachers. It is unlikely that this will occur unless the new Regional Executive Directors support and develop principals’ agency in facilitating school improvement in the ways that have already been described. And, given the practitioner approach to supporting schools which is claimed to be integral to this model, we reiterate even more emphatically that the preparation and ongoing professional development of principals warrants close attention.

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