An Exploratory Study of Exemplar Administrative Teams in the Primary School

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Annual Conference, Australian Association for Research in Education

27 November - 1 December, 1994

The University of Newcastle

Newcastle, New South Wales

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Abstract
The administrative team is a negotiated arrangement that serves to coordinate the endeavours of the principal, deputy principal(s) and other school staff with administrative responsibility in the self managing school. In many schools the administrative team is a problematic arrangement. This paper examines the operation of exemplar administrative teams in five primary schools in the government education system of Western Australia. The research attempts to identify some of the main organizational characteristics of exemplar administrative teams. Interview data are used to examine the history and evolution of the administrative teams, the allocation of responsibilities among team members, decision making, professional relationships and the purpose of the teams.

* Keywords: administrative team, school management, self managing school, principal, deputy principal.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1980s the administration of education in Australia has been characterized by a strong shift away from external, bureaucratic control toward school based decision making and management. A politically driven, on going educational reform agenda has seen the devolution of authority and the decentralization of new administrative responsibilities in government-controlled education systems, the review of traditional patterns of work organization and a shift toward an outcomes-based approach to learning, using nationally developed curriculum frameworks. The onset of an era of school-based decision making and management has made school administrators increasingly accountable to both the education authority and the school community for greater efficiency and flexibility in the use of human and material resources. Administrators are also more accountable for effectiveness in the achievement of worthwhile learning outcomes by students and for their capacity to renew the learning programme of the school. In the education systems of many other democratic nations there has been a similar shift toward making the school the major unit for decision making. (See Caldwell, 1990, David, 1989)

School based decision making and management changes the administration of schools in a fundamental way. Although the principal remains accountable for all aspects of school operations, the quantitative expansion of administrative functions and the upgrading of the level of accountability for many responsibilities require a broad range of teachers and also parents have opportunities to participate in school decision making and management. If the school is to have capacity to respond to both internal problems and opportunities for improvement as well as new system-level policy initiatives then there should be
structures for school participants to contribute to planning, policy making and program development. Ownership of school problems by people with knowledge of the problem is central to school renewal. Schools with a capacity for self management are characterized by a dynamic network of standing and ad hoc committees, teams and project groups. Walker (1994, p.38) is of the view that the move toward the use of teams in Australian schools is driven by a realisation that teachers cannot continue to work in isolation. The shift reflects a concern for the participation of teachers in problem solving.

In this paper attention is given to one specific type of team which has become an institutionalized component of school organization during the era of school based management and decision making. Administrative teams (or leadership or executive or senior management or building level teams) occur in all but the smallest schools of the mass education systems. Typically, the administrative team consists of the principal, the deputy principals and other senior staff of the school. In broad terms the administrative team functions as an executive which oversees the management of the total operation of the school. The administrative team has its origins in the era of hierarchical school administration but appears to have undergone transformation in the current era where more collaborative approaches are required. Although the administrative team has become an organizational arrangement which is central to the development of school level capacity for self management the purpose of the group and of how it contributes to school effectiveness is not clear in the research literature. Overall the massive research literature relating to various facets of school based decision making and management neglects or ignores the administrative team. There is substantial body of conceptual research relating to leadership and culture formation, managing school level change and self managed work teams which have implications for how administrative teams could be organized so as to contribute to school effectiveness.

The research literature investigating administrative teams is largely anecdotal. Most studies describe an aspect of the administrative team in a particular school. There are few field studies of administrative teams. In a study of eight secondary schools in the United States of America Pellicer Anderson, Keefe, Kelley, McCleary (1990) found that each school faced a unique set of internal and external conditions. Consequently:

No standard version exists for the administrative team concept and the practices associated with its effective use. Many principals are expected to create their own models under circumstances that are less than ideal. (Pellicer, Anderson, Keefe, Kelley, McCleary, 1990, p.18).

Walker and Stottis (1992, p.35) study of ten Australian schools found that decision making, monitoring and feedback, and planning and policy
formation were the main functions of the administrative team. Most principals believed that there was a consensual mode of decision making. Conceptual studies suggest that the purpose of the administrative team is to improve and build the culture of the school (Ridden, 1992) and to focus the work of other teams on the priorities of the school development plan (Bell, 1992). It is self evident that there is a need for research which enables further theorizing about what is perhaps the most important organizational unit in the school.

The purpose of this paper is to report on the findings of an interview based study of five exemplar administrative teams in primary schools of the government education system of Western Australia. During 1989-90 both the Western Australian Primary Principals Association and the Western Australian Primary Deputy Principals Association collaborated to promote the use of “a shared perspective on effective school leadership.” (See Campbell-Evans, 1990) The administrative team focus served to raise the expectations of deputy principals. For many deputy principals their expectations for significant responsibilities and collaborative approaches to decision making were not realised. (See Harvey, 1991) Research which contributes to an understanding of the necessary and sufficient conditions for the successful operation of administrative teams in primary school would help to improve the professional contribution of school administrators.

In this study the Western Australian Primary School Deputy Principals Association was asked to identify schools with “exemplar” administrative teams. From a deputy principal’s perspective these schools had developed a reputation for administrative team arrangements which reflected collaborative management practices, rather than the deputy principal as being the administrative assistant of the principal.

A semi-structured interview was used to obtain the perspectives of all members of the administrative teams of the five schools. (See Table 1) Data was obtained from seventeen interviews. Each interview took between 45 - 90 minutes. The focus of data collection was to investigate the main organizational characteristic of the administrative team, the nature of professional relationships and decision making, and of how the administrative team contributed to school effectiveness. The research was exploratory. Bolman & Deal’s (1991) structural, human resource, political and symbolic frames were used to make sense of the data. The findings are presented using organizing centres that emerged from the data.

| TABLE 1SCHOOLS AND ADMINISTRATIVE TEAMS |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Class of School               | Composition of Administrative Team | Number of Teachers   |
| Principal, 2 deputy principals, 2 acting deputy principals | | |
Principal, 2 deputy principals
Principal, 2 deputy principals
Principal, 2 deputy principals 29
25
19
Principal, deputy principal, senior assistant 23

No attempt was made to collect detailed information about the culture and organizational characteristics of the schools. There were extreme differences between the schools with respect to age, size, growth rates, the continuity of staffing and school community characteristics as well as the sophistication of the committee structure, the readiness of staff to participate in school-based decision making and the culture of the school.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM

The administrative team is a negotiated phenomenon which reflects the professional views of the participants as well as the circumstances of the school. The working relationship of the participants is dynamic and may change over time. Consequently the administrative team has a beginning, and is characterized by phases of development or even disorganization.

The administrative teams that were investigated consisted of the principal and deputy principal(s). In the school with only one deputy principal the senior assistant was also a member of the team. In another school the school registrar was considered to be a team member but only attended team meetings when there were items relating to school finances. The administrative team was clearly an exclusive group, although in some schools staff with special expertise were required to give advice at team meetings concerning specific agenda items.

The emergence of an administrative team is dependent upon the professional preference of the principal. As the line manager who is accountable for all aspects of school operations, it is the principal who must establish, cultivate and legitimize an executive group. The preference of the principal for a collaborative form of school administration was central to the establishment of an administrative team.

I have always believed, even prior to the great devolution thrust, that our deputies are a grossly under-utilized resource... I was fortunate in my last two schools that the deputies had so much to offer. It seemed to be a crazy waste of resources when their opinion was not sought on issues in the school. It seemed a natural thing to do to seek counsel from deputy principals or a junior primary coordinator.
A key ingredient is to embrace the concept of a shared leadership. If
they [the deputy principals] reject it then the consequences are [for the principal] of a kind of isolation without really knowing what is going on.

One principal could recall the point in his career where he abandoned a hierarchical view of school administration.

PI used to be an autocrat. At first I found it very difficult to trust other people and their capabilities. I did it [changed my perspective] because all of my (Masters) studies said that it was the way to go. I also did it because if I didn’t do it then I would have been completely snowed under. Once I did let go then it was easy to introduce it to a new group of people as they came in. Also I added a new thing, that if they [other members of administrative team] fell down then you pick them up.

The principals were comfortable with the notion of facilitating others to act as leaders in the school.

There were many patterns to the sequence of appointment to the school of staff who became participants in the administrative team. Where the simultaneous appointment of all team members occurred and where the principal had made an early decision to initiate change to the school of appointment, then special opportunities emerged for a quick bonding of staff who were equally unfamiliar with the detail of existing school operations.

DPBefore we came here we all sat down and met... We also met again during the school holidays before the school year started. A lot of ground rules were sorted out between the three of us. From that point we felt excited about being together... as the leader X [principal] had already given us some serious reading to do. He let us know how he liked to see a school working... I think that we all felt comfortable that we fitted in. When we came here we were not really very impressed with the school as such. That probably helped to meld us as a team.

In this school the early settlement of a close working relationship and their commitment to an agenda for change helped to create a distance between the administrative team and the teachers.

A different arrival situation is where a deputy principal was appointed to a school with two or more continuing participants of the administrative team.

DPWhen I came here there were duty statements from last year. I did not have to take over the role of my predecessor. Before the beginning of the year we sat down and we negotiated who was going to do what. So it did not stay the same as last year.
When my appointment was first arranged, X [principal] invited me down here. I didn't know what to expect. I was very nervous. Straight away I started to talk about forward planning. He treated me as a deputy principal and not as the "new kid on the block".

A final arrival situation is where the principal takes up appointment after the deputy principal.

When I came here there was no feedback as to how things operated at all. I really did not have a good knowledge of what the previous principal did. It was simply not known to me. I started by sitting down with them [other members of the administrative team] and said that we need to discuss these issues.

In each of the exemplar administrative teams there was an early attempt by the principal to establish an effective working relationship with other participants in the team. The principals were aware of the consequences of failure in this endeavour.

If new staff do not attempt to work as part of a team then the school staff and members of the community will see this.

It was also evident that principals worked hard at establishing and maintaining effective professional relationships among the participants of the administrative team.

I do a lot of planning concerning the administrative team by myself, but I always took it back at them. They do the same to me.

Over time close professional relationships developed. This was especially important for deputy principals in their first appointment who were anxious "not to make mistakes".

Two years ago we were not known to each other. In that two years we have developed a nice working rapport. We can easily discuss things. There is no drama.

I guess that there was a subtle sort of change that came through increased familiarity. It changed from three people sitting around the table talking to three people who could sit and joke. That is when you notice the difference. There is an understanding of how "other people think". We know each others strengths and weaknesses.

I think that the team has changed in the three years that I have been here. It has "opened out". We capitalize in each others strengths.

These developments should have improved the capacity of the
administrative team to undertake school administration.

Some practitioners found that they had to adjust their professional orientation and style. A senior assistant at first felt uncomfortable about being aligned with the administration in the micropolitics of the school.

SAI think that staff now see me as part of the administrative team, not as a peer, not as a colleague. Whereas before I was needs driven, now they [colleagues] see that decisions have been made that might impact on them and they have not been involved. They now see me as part of the school administration.

An arriving deputy principal underwent a change of style.

When X (deputy principal) arrived he had an authoritarian manner. He was able to see how Y (deputy principal) and I worked and each week you could see that he was starting to drop the way he used to do things and pick up our way.

Over time there were periods when the effectiveness of the administrative team declined. Generally these periods were associated with:

- external professional development or professional association commitments or consultancy for two or more team members;
- a sequence of special activities, usually coinciding with the end of a school semester; and
- a high level of illness among teaching staff which reduced the non-teaching time of team members.

Each of the above situations had potential to break down the frequency of communication between team members. The direct consequence was uncertainty as to who had responsibility for key actions. An unintended outcome was a lowering of the level of respect for the professionalism of other team members.

The administrative team is a dynamic phenomenon. The development of the administrative team reflects the professional and personal relationships of the members as well as the administrative demands of the school. From time to time, team members reassess their perspective of the administrative team, as do other members of the school community.

The Allocation of Responsibilities

The way in which decisions are made about the allocation of responsibilities among the senior staff of a school has received little attention from researchers. Decision making is complex, as the
principal has a responsibility to ensure that the professional capabilities and interests of the team members are matched with the administrative demands of the school. This is not an easy undertaking if little is known about arriving team members or beginning deputy principals or team members who are motivated by the expectation of career progression.

PIt takes a lot of thought about how to use a new deputy principal. I guess that there is a lot of ësussing outí on my part and I guess on his or her part too. You have to feel your way into it.

A number of issues emerged from the interview data. One difference between the schools was the extent to which the principal decided upon the allocation of the responsibilities.

DPWe all came [to the school] together. We were all feeling each other out to see what each was like. X [principal] made it clear ëI am the principal, I am responsible for decision making. I carry the caní. Therefore delegation took place until X [principal] was comfortable with the way we could operate. The hierarchical structure of the school still exists. If you have a deputy principal who does not pull his or her weight then the principal carries the can.

In other schools the principal was prepared to place all or nearly all responsibilities on the bargaining table. For example:

PWe all sat down, we used the whiteboard and we brainstormed. We categorized the responsibilities under the headings I mentioned earlier. We looked at it and said ëWhat can you handle?,í ëWhat do you feel comfortable with?í What they didnít feel comfortable with we put across the three of us. The three of us provided a back-up. If one was out, then everybody else would cover. It was through discussion, through brainstorming and by letting people take on board things with which they felt comfortable, things that they knew that they could do well, things which they knew would challenge them. It was a consensus. We reached a decision as a group.

Where team members were in their first deputy principalship it was important that they were given responsibilities in which they could be successful. At the ëbargaining tableí some beginning deputy principals attempted to ëstake a claimí for their preferred responsibilities.

DPI came here with the idea that I was not going to be the first aid lady. So I said what I want to do ... Maths, Science and Physical Education. Everybody said that you canít do that... However we managed to work it out... I had not worked in an administrative team before.

In the case of an arriving deputy principal the principal would
typically initiate a reassessment of the workloads of all team members.

DP When I first came here and the other deputy principal was transferred here X [principal] wrote down all of the responsibilities and said, "What do you want to do?" "What don’t you want to do?" It was all put in the pot. Everything was open for negotiation.

Some of the things we decided to take on as a group. Discipline was to be the responsibility of all three with X [other deputy principal] as the coordinator. At first we picked out responsibilities that we really wanted to do. I had done a lot of language work in previous schools. Here it was in a big mess and it was agreed that I should take it. We had a lot of ěto-ing and ěro-ingi and eventually we sorted it all out. So we agreed you should take this one and I will take the other. When we got down to the last stage then there were three left and they were all ěyuckyi. So we did one each.

The allocation of responsibilities was not fixed. During the year there was periodic reassessment of the performance and the workloads of members of the administrative team in relation to the program of the school.

PI think that there are changes across the year in the allocation of responsibilities. Sometimes it takes the form of ěcan I help you with this particular activity?î.

There were also examples of where a principal would advise a team member to take on new responsibilities in which they lacked experience so as to enhance their prospects for career progression.

DP At the beginning of the year X [principal] was saying who was applying for promotion. He was leading us on for promotion. He was saying ěAre you promoting?î Do you need experience in certain things?î

In one school there was a concern that each of the deputy principals had a significant presence in the school.

DP I have a more visible role. The other deputy has a less visible role. I enjoy public speaking whereas X [deputy principal] spends more time with the stock. I excel at public speaking whereas she does not enjoy it. Hence our profiles are built in a different way.

The principals held different professional viewpoints about the extent to which all administrative responsibilities could be delegated to other school staff or to committees. Responsibilities that could not be delegated were:

PFinal decisions about finance, decisions about the allocation and organization of classes. The selection of teaching staff where we have that option, especially for temporary staff. For these things I always
have to know what is the final decision.

PI think that there are some responsibilities that the principal must take on. One of the things that I have always done is the allocation of children to classes, especially at Year One. I believe that someone must take the knives in the back from parents if they do not like what class their children are in.

One of the other things that I have to do is to link with the Parents and Citizens’ Association.

There are also things like finances.

By comparison, another principal held a view that team members could undertake nearly all responsibilities.

PI believe that it is possible to delegate everything. As the principal I see my role as being a facilitator and as a public relations person where I have responsibility for marketing the school. I need to be kept informed, and the staff do keep me informed.

An important issue in the allocation of responsibilities was the extent to which members of the administrative team should have separate or overlapping responsibilities in their workload. In each administrative team there were at least some responsibilities that were predominantly or exclusively managed by one team member. In schools with the strongest separation of responsibilities there tended to be duty statements which listed up to 20 responsibilities for a particular team member, half of which would be shared. More flexible arrangements were found in the schools where there were effective personal as well as professional relationships among team members.

PI think that we are one of the few schools that does not have a set of procedures whereby deputy one does this, and deputy two does that. We looked at a couple of options and we didn’t do it. Initially we weren’t too sure what had been the previous breakdown of responsibilities. We decided to let the whole lot of it wash over us. Even to this day we have not specialized. It is only in four or five areas where we are specialized.

DP We are all prepared to cover for each other.

There were a number of reasons for the overlapping of the responsibilities of team members.

PA further strength of the administrative team is for the control of aggressiveness [by parents and teachers]. With a particular problem it is sometimes appropriate for a member to pass responsibility for a problem to another member of the team if they feel that a different
approach, especially with parents, may be more productive.

Matching the management style of a particular team member with a complainant or task would facilitate more effective resolution of the problem. In another school there were a number of principles for the flexible use of team members.

DP We try to use one another’s particular strengths in allocating particular responsibilities. If there is a major project then we all pitch in and do it. It depends upon how busy each person is at the time.

DPThe big advantage of flexibility is that it gives us an opportunity to share. The informality gives us an opportunity to cross into each other’s areas.

PIIf you do too much specialization and one person is away for whatever reason then you can't just say 'I don't know what to do. That is Bill's or Mary's role. You have to have a toe in all of these specialist areas. Also I would like to think that I have a lot of input into what is going on.

Here overlapping extended the direct influence of the principal.

PLook, one of my worries is that we will never start to categorize responsibilities as belonging to particular people. An admin[istrative] team is 'us together'. I don't want X [deputy principal] or Y [deputy principal] to think that this responsibility is nothing to do with me and that it is the principal’s problem.

The overlapping of responsibilities was dependent upon the development of effective relationships among team members. Overlapping responsibilities could create problems.

DPIn future we need to be clearer about responsibilities ... This is one of my major concerns that has to be cleared up for next year. The areas of responsibility haven't been clearly defined. The MIS [Management Information System] is an area that I head up.

MHDoyou have responsibility for the MIS?

DPWell that is how it should be, but sometimes X [principal] gets some information about MIS design, and then he almost takes over. Instead of saying 'Well, what do we have about this [field of data] and say 'Well, if we don't have something then let's get something.' It is almost a step in and take over for that short time and step out again, rather than say 'Well, that is your committee. You do what you need to do.'
Here overlapping was complicated with the momentary shift of the principal to a more direct form of influence.

The process of allocating and coordinating responsibilities is central to the development and maintenance of a successful administrative team. The process should enable a matching of the professional needs, competencies and interests of team members with the main administrative demands of the school. For deputy principals who have expectations for career progression then it becomes important that they obtain significant responsibility. In some schools it may also be important to ensure that all members have a mix of responsibilities which enhance their public presence in at least some arenas of the school.

Organizational Arrangements and Decision Making

It was expected that exemplar administrative teams would be characterized by operating procedures that enabled team members to coordinate effectively the operation of the school. Specifically, team members should have capacity to meet, to plan together as a team, to be able to make informed decisions and to solve problems. (See Huszcso, 1990, p.38)

In all schools, under normal conditions, there were regular, scheduled meetings lasting between one and three hours.

DPWe meet on Tuesday afternoon and together we work out what is happening during the next week and in the long term. We get together and we talk it out and run ideas past each other. If something is not going to work out then someone will say so. We try to get it really pat between us before we take it to the staff.

DPWe meet weekly. Occasionally we go out to lunch together. We lock ourselves in the office and tell the secretaries that we are not to be disturbed. X [principal] has more time than us. He will often set out a framework and then put it to us. Then we will pick it to pieces and discuss it with him. We will add to the plan. There is a lot of planning and a lot of discussion. It doesnít happen quickly.

Complex problems were often considered in team meetings arriving at a decision required large amounts of time in which to analyse information carefully and to understand the various contingencies that were possible in the context of the school. In one school the ëclosed doorí approach that was adopted by the principal during meeting time was of concern to the teachers.

DPOur weekly meetings are sacrosanct. This is something that staff have felt difficult to come to terms with.
Spontaneous meetings occurred when all team members were available and there was a need to arrive at a decision. Deputy principals who shared an office also continued discussion of matters that had been considered in meetings. The unscheduled discussions were often a key event in narrowing the range of choices relating to an issue or a problem prior to a scheduled meeting. Team effectiveness was perceived to decline when scheduled meetings were cancelled because of an excessive workload.

Over time the meeting procedures in some schools became more formalized. Collective decision making takes time. If uncontrolled, then problem solving could consume all of the available meeting time.

DPI think our administrative team has the same problems as any committee. It is much more efficient for one person to make decisions, rather than to consider three people, but you get a much more tempered decision when you involve three people. We are tending to let people go off and do things and then come back and tell us what they have done. I think that it took a long while to get to this stage.

The efficiency of administrative team meetings had at some stage been a concern in all schools. Strategies to manage time included the use of agendas, preparation of draft guidelines for presentation at meetings, limiting the time for discussion of a particular agenda item and the scheduling of complex issues over a number of meetings. Monitoring of the efficiency of team meetings was important.

PI have to make sure that we donít get off track at our meetings. If we reach a point and we are just talking, then I say ¿Can we do anything about it?¿ If we canít influence it, then it has to come off the agenda. If we canít do anything about a problem then we are wasting our time.

Failure to ensure the efficiency of team meetings was likely to cause frustration.

Decision making in the exemplar administrative teams was universally described as being either ¿shared¿ or ¿democratic¿ or ¿collaborative¿. In all teams, members had experienced successful group problem solving. The participation of a number of people provided more information from which to identify and conceptualize problems, to choose strategies and to seek solutions. Over time as team members saw the effects of their collective decision making then there was a sense of confidence in their combined capacity to manage the affairs of the school.

In each exemplar of the administrative team there were issues for which the principal would accept the dominant view. There were teams where it was clear that for many issues the principal would take counsel from the views that emerged in the team meeting, but would finally make the
decision. The different patterns of decision making reflected the hierarchical - collaborative contradictions that were evident in the power structure of schools with capacity for self management. The exemplar administrative team also differed according to whether members with a particular responsibility could make their own decision either prior to or after discussion with the principal. One principal encouraged team members to make decisions.

DPIn this school there is delegation of responsibility. Teachers in this school are encouraged to make the decisions. In many areas I am able to make the decision and to feed the information back to X (principal).

DPX [principal] says that he hates the work ëdelegationí. He likes the work ënegotiationí because you [as a deputy principal] feel that you are part of it. He wants us to use our own ideas rather than to do what someone else has planned.

By encouraging team members to make decisions and report later the principal had to be prepared to accept final responsibility.

PLast week something came up where a member of staff make a mistake. There was a rap from the Ministry. I was prepared to wear that one. No one else knows about it but that is part of the responsibility of the principal.

In other administrative teams, members were careful to discuss a task with the principal before taking action.

Attention was also given to monitoring the effectiveness of the main decisions that had been made by the administrative team.

DPTThings can always be improved. What we do is have post-mortems on the ëbig thingsí. We discuss what happened among ourselves. We discuss whether we were completely satisfied and how it affected staff. We consider things that we will drop, things that we will continue with.

Monitoring of the process of decision making developed capacity for what has been termed organizational learning. (See Bennis and Nanus; 1985, p.191) Review of the worth of decision making developed the potential of the school to become a centre for change.

Professional Relationships

Shared decision making amongst the members of the administrative team was underpinned by two related notions: a shared perspective of the way the school should be organized and a recognition of the need for professionalism. The frequency and intensity of social interaction
among team members as they faced the demands of school administration had the potential for the social construction of an administrators' perspective of the school.

A shared perspective of the way the school should be organized consisted of a number of elements. First there was a view about the procedures for the administrative team.

DPWe have a shared ideology in this school. We all have a similar view of how the administrative team should work... The shared view developed very quickly. Probably it took only a couple of weeks.

Secondly, there was a shared view concerning the kind of learning programme that was needed in the school. In many of the teams the members believed that they shared a common 'educational philosophy'.

PIf an administrative team is effective, then its members must have the same philosophies, especially with respect to what we offer kids. While the three of us may be similar in the way we handle kids, we all learn from each other how to manage students. Through discussion, we learn from each other.

PI feel that the admin.[istrative] team has a recognised philosophy that benefits the school and that it will influence teachers.

In some teams, a common philosophy emerged as an unintended outcome of professional relationships. In other teams there had been periods of on-going philosophical debate which involved considerable give and take by team members.

PThere may be philosophical disagreement between the members of the administrative team, but it is still possible to remain a cohesive unit.

When differences of opinion emerged, there was respect for the views of other team members. Typically, differences of opinion were not disclosed to the staff. Maintaining a united front was essential in general staff meetings. Thirdly, in some teams there was a shared view of the future development of the school.

DPThe three of us have a good idea of what we see as school priorities and of what has to be done, and of what can be held off for a while.

PA lot of what we do in the administrative team is looking one or two years ahead, as to what we should be doing in the school development plan. Three years ago we started off as a new school, now we can start to plan three to five years ahead.
This principal was able to give estimates of the number of years that it would take to accomplish key system level changes.

In relationships among team members, a high value was placed upon what was termed 'professionalism'. Professional 'closeness' was one of the facets of professionalism.

DPI don't think that the members of the administrative team have to be close personally. However they will become close because of their shared experiences. Closeness comes from doing your work professionally.

Professional 'closeness' was demonstrated by participation rather than by 'sitting on the fence' and through a commitment to final decisions.

DPThere is more to an administrative team than just the characteristics of the people. There is the honesty and trust aspect. You need to be honest with each other and to trust each other. Being open is an essential point. You must express exactly how you feel. Initially this was a difficult thing for me to do when all three of us were in the room. Now X (principal) knows that he is getting my total reaction, my gut feeling of what I want.

Accountability and capacity for performance were other components of professionalism.

PA team requires a professional approach... In this team I am not afraid to advise X (deputy principal) and Y (deputy principal) that 'I think you should have done it this way'. They are prepared to do the same for me. There is no talking behind backs.

A final facet of professionalism was collective responsibility for the administration of the school. Team members had a commitment to the effective administration of the school rather than particular tasks in a duty statement.

DPIn an administrative team you take collective credit rather than individual credit for what happens. We all work together as a team.

The shared perspectives of the way the school should be and of professionalism were key elements which influenced the nature of the professional relationship of the members of exemplar administrative teams.

One of the consequences of the sharing of responsibilities is that deputy principals may acquire a strong public presence in the school. One deputy principal was cautious that he did not undermine the authority of the principal.
DPI respect X [principal] as a person. We certainly see eye to eye on school issues. I have never posed a threat to his leadership. That is something that I have been very conscious of.

I believe that the principal should have a slightly higher profile than the deputy principals. The principal as the same suggests should be the key person in the school. The principal takes the end of the line responsibility for what happens in the school. I believe that the principal should be the ātop dogi so to speak. It is not that we [the deputy principals] have any great ambitions. As a team we share the responsibility, but the staff know that X [principal] has the final responsibility.

There was a concern that professional relationships should not undermine the office of the principal.

Purpose and Effectiveness

The exemplar administrative teams were found to have a common generic purpose. Collectively, the members of each team attempted to monitor the total operation of the school to ensure that there was coordination of all activities and to undertake forward planning. There was significant variation between the administrative teams with respect to the focus of their endeavours. The administrative focus reflected both the preference of the principal for the degree of delegation of administrative responsibilities and also the level of readiness of the school staff to take up opportunities for school-based decision making. Just as the principals varied in the extent to which they facilitated participation in specific aspects of school administration, so also the schools varied in the linkage of the administrative team to the general staff meeting, the specialist committees and the school-based decision making group.

Monitoring and the coordination of school operations were the focus of all exemplar administrative teams.

The function of the administrative team is for monitoring the operations of the school. I don't think that it is where you make policy. The administrative team needs to have a clearer vision of where everything fits together. They, more than the staff, have to understand the whole picture. Success depended upon a high level of collective awareness of what was happening in the school. Dialogue with staff was essential if emerging problems were to be identified and effectively managed. Administrative teams were also proactive in providing staff with information. Communication with staff was intended to make clear school policy, procedures and practices. Some administrative teams articulated an
educational viewpoint and attempted to manage the culture of the school. Coordination also required that organizational arrangements were in place for future events.

PI have said that certain things will happen by a certain date. Sometimes it is not going to happen. Now the administrative team will take this up and ensure that it does happen.

DPO On one occasion, one of the staff members told me, "Oh, aren't we lucky that we have done all of this." What he didn't realise was that it was a setup. We had made sure that our school development plans would be completed.

The support of teachers was another focus of the work of administrative teams. Almost all of the interviewees believed that the purpose of the administrative team was to ensure that teachers could focus on teaching.

The problem is that with school development the principal [is becoming] further and further removed from the teaching program and the teachers as they perform their role. That is in enabling the teachers to perform their primary function in teaching children. Now a whole lot of things are attached to that. There is morale, esteem in the community, provision of resources, not overloading them with a lot of irrelevant testing and providing collegiate support. There are a lot of factors which affect the performance of teachers in the classroom.

In other schools, teacher support emphasized professional development.

Initiating and managing change is also a key focus of the exemplar administrative teams. In general terms this comes when the administrative team initiates or supports activities that will lead to changes in the direction of the school. Devolution has delivered to schools significant capacity to undertake change.

DP The squiggle documents [education system policies re school development plans, school-based decision making groups, financial accountability] have had a big influence on the way administrative teams operate... The main focus has been to work through planning for school development.

There was variation among the administrative teams as to the degree of influence that should be exercised in setting school priorities.

DP I think that we [the administrative team] do this [improve the effectiveness of the school] by locating priorities, by looking for the direction that we want to go, making sure that we meet the requirements of the Ministry... It is beyond one person to do all the planning. It is much better if it is done by a team. Now to gain from that, you need to have a concise unified direction. At school development days
it is important that the administrative team puts forward ideas and attempts to get agreement on these points. Sometimes staff will not think that these are good directions. An administrative team allows for inner debate before it proceeds to open debate.

In the study schools, the role of the administrative team in policy making differed. Some of the exemplar administrative teams were key agencies for policy initiation, while in other schools this function was more prominent in the special purpose committees and the general staff meeting. However, in all schools, policy initiatives were legitimised at general staff meetings.

The members of many of the administrative teams were conscious of the 'them-us' division that could emerge from the development of a close-knit and highly effective administrative team. One principal who was genuinely collaborative in his approach to managing staff was of the view that:

P The concept of the administrative team is a dangerous concept because it has the connotation of exclusivity and top-down decision making. I think that the administrative team's role is to be at the bottom of the pyramid, supporting the teachers above it. The hardest working people in the school are the teachers. The role of the administrative team is to create an environment where teachers can best perform their duties. This may require that the administrative team has to provide a suitable timetable, resources and a buffer against aggressive parents.

The principal was also aware of the political context of the movement towards strengthening administrative teams.

P Some deputy principals are pushing the notion of the administrative team. It is a concept based on status. It is to give them more status and not upon the effective provision of services. It is a concept that does not sit easily with me.

In other schools there were team members who were conscious of how the administrative team could disempower teachers during the era of school-based decision making and management. There was a dilemma. Administrative teams acted to insulate teachers from the full impact of mandatory policy initiatives, but may underestimate the need for teachers to participate in the early stages of policy development.

P There are often contentious issues in the school. If you don't use the administrative team to sift through some of the issues and objections then you find that a lot of garbage has to be sorted out at the staff meeting.

DPM Many issues require further information. It would simply be wasting a lot of their [staff] time if the matters were considered at a general
staff meeting.

By being proactive you can generate a lot of resentment.

Initiating change in the school required dialogue between the administrative team and the school staff if policy making was to be collaborative.

DPI think that there is still a fair amount of top-down decision making. This is because many teachers do not make themselves familiar with the processes and the changes. In order to keep abreast of things, I think that the administrative team must accept a fair degree of responsibility to ensure that other people know what is going on. I think that there are ways around making people feel that they are inferior or that they are being 'fed from the top'. Part of that comes back to working on the school development plan by creating ownership of what is in the document.

In judging the effectiveness of an administrative team it is important that at least two sets of criteria are considered: the internal procedures and the professional relationships of the administrative team, as well as the linkage of the administrative team to the school staff and other committees, teams and project groups. To fulfil the generic purpose of the administrative team, members need to be concerned with the educational programme of the school and not be seen as focusing on administration.

DISCUSSION

Each of the five administrative teams represented an impressive example of how an executive group attempted to support and develop school level capacity for self management. Neither the administrative teams nor the schools were without problems. Continuous, mandated system level change placed enormous demands on the principals who as line managers were expected to implement policies which paradoxically were intended to create greater capacity for self management.

Each of the organizing centres of the data analysis identify some of the features of exemplar administrative teams. The implications of these findings are now considered.

There was significant variation in the organizational arrangements of the five administrative teams. If researchers, system level administrators and policy makers are to appreciate the contribution of administrative teams to school effectiveness then administrative teams should be recognized as human constructs that are negotiated phenomena. The organization of the administrative team emerges from dialogue among professionals in the context of a particular school. Variation among teams is to be expected. The differences reflect the unique
historical and cultural characteristics of schools as organizational phenomena. Differences are also derived from the professional expectations and preferences of the senior staff of the school, especially those of the principal. Structuralist, logical positivist or manageralist theoretical frameworks provide only a one dimensional view of the administrative team in a school with capacity for decision making and management. Interpretive, socially critical, micropolitical and cultural theoretical perspectives are necessary if human will and intentionality be recognized as shaping the administrative team. In many ways administrative teams are communities, or learning communities rather than organizational unit.

The principal is a critical actor in any attempt to establish an administrative team. In the context of the education system the principal is responsible for all aspects of school operations. Administrative teams cannot develop without sponsorship from the principal. The five principals of this study differed in their reasons for establishing administrative teams. The expectations of the principals may have been related to different levels of comfort with the delegation of authority and shared leadership.

The membership of the administrative team was decided by the principal. In the study schools almost all team members were principals and deputy principals. The devolution of new administrative functions to schools, such as increased financial management, or the creation of new teaching positions, for example advanced skills teachers 1-3, with responsibility for professional development, has implications for team membership. Self management in schools leads to teacher empowerment. Teacher leaders will become increasingly important in schools. There is a need to identify the purpose of the administrative team in order to know whether other school participants with authority, expert knowledge and interest should have team membership.

Administrative teams evolve over time. The exemplar teams in this study were characterized by the early development of an effective working relationship among teams. In understanding how exemplar administrative teams form it is important to find out why a sense of trust, respect and mutual support quickly develops. Perhaps all team members played an important part in team building. The shift to the use of work teams in late twentieth century work places creates a case for the matching of compatible staff who will comprise a work team. (See Belbin, 1993, p.34) Across time the administrative team may further develop or even become disorganized. The frequency of scheduled and spontaneous meetings was critical to the maintenance of effective communication among team members.

The allocation of responsibilities among the members of the administrative team is a process that has not been well researched.
There was evidence that principals were generally guided by a concern for utilizing the professional strengths of team members. The principals in this study recognized the deputy principals and other team members as professionals and not as the administrative assistants of the principal. There were opportunities for deputy principals to obtain experiences that were a preparation for the principalship. (See Harvey, 1994). The notion of overlapping responsibilities required that all team members had a concern for the effective management of the total operation of the school. The flexible use of staff and collective responsibility may conflict with system level guidelines which require that deputy principals should perform one of a number of recognized roles, such as proposed in the Principal Class Review (1993).

Decision making in the administrative teams reflected the hierarchical-collaborative contradictions that were part of the structure of the school with capacity for self management. The principal was accountable to the education authority and the community for the school. Consequently although there was authentic collaboration in administrative team meetings, in the end the principal did not have to act on the view of the team. Team members were aware of this situation. However, in attempting to solve complex problems where there may not have been a best solution principals were often appreciative and accepting of the view of the team with regard to the management of school operations.

The team members had a shared perspective of the school. There was understanding of team procedures, a working consensus about educational philosophy and in some cases a common view on the future development of the school. This did not mean that there were differences of opinion. There was a strong expectation that team members would demonstrate professionalism in their work. Professional support, accountability and collective responsibility were elements of the working relationships of team members.

The strength of the professional relationships and the exclusive nature of administrative teams can disempower teachers and other committees and teams in the school. Walker and Stott (1992, p.37) have noted the need for criteria to decide what decision making is the responsibility of the administrative team. In this study the policy process of the school involved the general staff meeting and specialist committees. As the schools varied in their level of development for school management different degrees of involvement of the administrative team were appropriate for each school. Administrative teams have a generic purpose to monitor and coordinate school operations and to ensure forward planning. Identifying the specific purposes of the administrative team was more difficult. Establishing criteria to assess the effectiveness of administrative teams should recognize not
only the internal dynamics of the team, but more importantly how the administrative team contributes to school effectiveness. In any school the administrative team can not have a rival agenda to that of the school community.

Finally, a number of areas for further research emerge from this study:

1. What are the specific functions of the administrative team in a school with capacity for self management?

2. Which school participants should be members of an administrative team?

3. How is shared decision making possible in the administrative team when the principal remains accountable for school operations?

4. What criteria should be used to assess the effectiveness of the administrative team?

5. What is the relationship of the administrative team with other committees, teams and project groups within the school?

REFERENCES


Conf1-94/MH/jw/11/94
Indicates P principal, DP deputy principal, SA senior assistant.

An Exploratory Study of Exemplar Administrative Teams in the Primary School

Michael Harvey
Abstract

The administrative team is a negotiated arrangement that serves to coordinate the endeavours of the principal, deputy principal(s) and other school staff with administrative responsibility in the self-managing school. In many schools the administrative team is a problematic arrangement. This paper examines the operation of exemplar administrative teams in five primary schools in the government education system of Western Australia. The research attempts to identify some of the main organizational characteristics of exemplar administrative teams. Interview data are used to examine the history and evolution of the administrative teams, the allocation of responsibilities among team members, decision making, professional relationships and the purpose of the teams.
INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1980s the administration of education in Australia has been characterized by a strong shift away from external, bureaucratic control toward school-based decision making and management. A politically driven, ongoing educational reform agenda has seen the devolution of authority and the decentralization of new administrative responsibilities in government-controlled education systems, the review of traditional patterns of work organization and a shift toward an outcomes-based approach to learning, using nationally developed curriculum frameworks. The onset of an era of school-based decision making and management has made school administrators increasingly accountable to both the education authority and the school community for greater efficiency and flexibility in the use of human and material resources. Administrators are also more accountable for effectiveness in the achievement of worthwhile learning outcomes by students and for their capacity to renew the learning programme of the school. In the education systems of many other democratic nations there has been a similar shift toward making the school the major unit for decision making. (See Caldwell, 1990, David, 1989)

School based decision making and management changes the administration of schools in a fundamental way. Although the principal remains accountable for all aspects of school operations, the quantitative expansion of administrative functions and the upgrading of the level of accountability for many responsibilities require a broad range of teachers and also parents have opportunities to participate in school decision making and management. If the school is to have capacity to respond to both internal problems and opportunities for improvement as well as new system-level policy initiatives then there should be structures for school participants to contribute to a school's effectiveness. In any school the administrative team can not have a rival agenda to that of the school community.

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