School principals and the dilemmas of restructuring:

The problem of participation

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ABSTRACT

Restructuring seeks to improve education by recasting the roles, relationships, and responsibilities of people in schools and central authorities. This study aimed to find out what it is about school restructuring that principals find so difficult. The study, conducted in Western Australia in the first decade of state education restructuring, involved cases rated by 1 000 school administrators, in-depth interviews with 10 principals and a six-year case study of one school principal. Interpretive-constructivist analysis of narrative accounts told in principals’ voices revealed that principals find restructuring difficult because their work is saturated with dilemmas. Three dilemmas are conceptualised: the accountability dilemma that principals are accountable for decisions made by or with others; the autonomy dilemma that principals maintain authority while working collaboratively; and the efficiency dilemma that principals share decision making while using resources efficiently. Faced with the untidiness of shared decision making, principals prefer accountability, autonomy, and efficiency over collaboration. This response to the dilemmas is driven by an ethic of responsibility but it is an ethic of care that underpins participative decision making.

School principals and the dilemmas of restructuring: The problem of participation

The study is set in Western Australia in the state education system in the last decade of the 20th century. This education system, like its counterparts world-wide, is in the throes of major reorganisation. Policy announced in "Better Schools in Western Australia: A programme for improvement" (1987) marked the change from a highly regulated and centralised education system to one in which schools were to have increasing control over their goals as well as the resources and strategies for achieving them. School-based management was to replace the traditional reliance on the centre so that schools would become more flexible to cope with change, more responsive to meet local needs, and more accountable in the effective and efficient use of their resources.

Until then principals of Western Australian government schools had spent their working lives in a centralised education department. In one swift policy change, principals were expected
to involve members of their school community in decision making processes. Rather than relying on bureaucratic direction, principals were now required to assume responsibility for their school’s improvement. Their previous experience in a centralised system had shaped their assumption of authority in schools. Now they were required to share their authority with members of the school community. This is a study of principals’ experiences of the pressures and contradictions of school restructuring in Western Australia in the period 1992 to 1997.

CONTEXT

What principals in Western Australia were experiencing was part of a wide-spread reorganisation of the delivery of education across the nation. The pressures faced by principals of Western Australian government schools need to be located within the wider Australian social, economic and political context. The restructuring movement is one of three reform cycles that have attempted to shift control away from the traditional centralised state education structures (Angus, 1995).

The first attempt occurred in the 1970s when the Australian Schools Commission was set up and funds were distributed to states for special purpose programs for disadvantaged students and to promote innovation. The aim was to loosen the control of state systems, humanise the large bureaucratic state education departments, and allow schools freedom to engage in school-level decision making processes.

The second reform cycle emerged during the 1980s. This time the impetus came not from the federal government but from state-initiated policies (Angus, 1995). The movement, generally referred to as school-based management (Gamage, Sipple & Partridge, 1996) was, ironically, characterised by indisputably "top-down" policies in pursuit of the "bottom-up" goal of decentralisation (Chapman & Boyd, 1986). Common to all state policies was the implicit goal of getting better value for education expenditure (Angus, 1995) and a shared language of efficiency, accountability, quality and excellence (Beare, 1991).

The third reform cycle had quite a different origin. This time the impetus came from a coalition of industry, unions and employers which urged industry-wide reforms aimed at increasing productivity and making the Australian economy more internationally competitive. The rationale for reform was shared responsibility for productivity by managers and workers. The vehicle to promote the reform in schools was the National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning (Angus, 1995).

The three reform cycles were carried out against a background of changing economic conditions. The 1950s and 1960s were characterised by prolonged and predictable prosperity. Centralised hierarchical education management structures were successful because the goals of schooling were clear and agreed (Spicer, 1995). In the ensuing period of economic stability during the 1970s, interest developed in issues of participation and democracy in school management. Efforts to transfer authority to schools were supported by special commonwealth funding—Angus’ (1995) first reform cycle. The 1980s was an era of "fiscal euphoria" (Spicer, 1995, p. 232), characterised by concerted policy moves by state governments to give more authority to schools. Australians were enjoying the "good times" (Simpkins, 1982), a period of affluence, public confidence, security and certainty. Schools were encouraged to take responsibility for school planning and budgeting in collaboration with their school communities. This was the period of the beginning of school restructuring—Angus’ (1995) second reform cycle. Spicer (1995) argues that the 1980s was an era of resource and financial irresponsibility. In contrast, the tightening economic climate of the 1990s produced a new focus on accountability and frugality. Despite mounting national debt, people were demanding economic growth and quality performance (Simpkins, 1982). In
these "difficult times," people began to feel vulnerable, and demands for accountability were viewed as a threat to their authority. In this period the third reform cycle, the National Schools Project, was implemented.

Schools of the 1990s in Australia face the challenge of implementing restructuring policies in a climate of insecurity against a background of earlier optimism and certainty. In addition, schools are expected to be open, responsive and finely tuned to the needs of their communities in a climate of public scrutiny and accountability. That the pressures seem contradictory is no surprise because the restructuring agenda itself rests uncomfortably between two competing philosophies—the social democratic tradition and corporate managerialism. On the one hand, the social democratic tradition which underpinned the first reform cycle of the 1970s promotes public education as a tool for social reform (Dow, 1991). Social democratic reforms press for decentralised structures in which schools are autonomous and teachers as professionals make important decisions (Meadmore, Limerick, Thomas & Lucas, 1995). On the other hand, corporate managerialism is concerned about economic rationalism (Knight, Lingard & Porter, 1993). The focus is on centralising structures and aligning schools with corporate management through bureaucratic regulation and centrally prescribed goals of efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability.

That the two philosophies lie side by side, but at odds, beneath Australian reform efforts is well documented (Blackmore, 1990; Goddard, 1992). How the pressures that arise from these two competing philosophies are manifest in the work of principals and are dealt with by principals is the subject of this study.

DILEMMAS

Central to my study is the notion of dilemma. In the restructuring literature, the word is used to mean ambiguity and uncertainty (for example, Beare, 1991) as well as to imply a task of considerable difficulty (for instance, Conley, 1993). Others such as Darling-Hammond (1995), and Dimmock and O'Donoghue (1997), use the word in its literal sense, meaning a choice between Scylla and Charybdis, the devil and the deep blue sea. I adopt the literal meaning: dilemmas are situations in which principals face incompatible but inescapable courses of actions.

The pressures and contradictions of restructuring can be conceptualised as three dilemmas: the accountability dilemma, the autonomy dilemma, and the efficiency dilemma. The accountability dilemma is the coexistence of diffused communal responsibility with hierarchical accountability. Principals are expected to transform their schools and involve others in deciding how this is done but the success or failure of the decisions rests with the principal. Writers such as Conley and Goldman (1994) and Murphy (1991, 1994) identify the accountability dilemma as the main unresolved issue of restructuring. The autonomy dilemma concerns principals acting autonomously as the school’s leader and also sharing decision making authority. Although the tension between autonomy and participatory decision making is frequently mentioned in the restructuring literature (for example, Clune & White, 1988; Short & Greer, 1997), nowhere has it been named the autonomy dilemma. Similarly, what I label the efficiency dilemma does not appear explicitly in the literature, although its theme runs through many writers’ work (for instance, Angus, 1995; Marshall, 1991). The efficiency dilemma concerns being both democratic and efficient. The tension arises because, on the one hand, principals are expected to involve people in processes to arrive at decisions for which group members share responsibility and, on the other hand, they are expected to use resources, including time, and people’s energy, expertise and commitment, in ways that are least wasteful (Elmore, 1993). In these three dilemmas principals are required to involve others in making decisions, while being accountable, acting autonomously, and using resources efficiently.
METHOD

In the early 1990s I became interested in principals’ perspectives of restructuring. I was contracted to write professional development materials and to present courses to principals over a four year period in what was known as the state education authority’s School Leadership Program. Its aim was to assist principals adopt the values and practices promoted in the Better Schools policy. The program consisted of modules in which groups of 25 principals engaged in a variety of in-school and out-of-school structured activities over a three-month period. As a tutor for 36 courses, I worked with approximately 1 000 school leaders, facilitating discussions and challenging them to reflect on their practice.

I expected to find principals eager to involve staff and community members in school decisions and to share responsibility for school development. I was surprised by principals’ talk about their sense of powerlessness and the difficulties of increased work, loss of identity and the inability of members of their school communities to engage in collaborative decision making (Wildy, 1997; Wildy & Punch, 1997). This mismatch between my expectations and my experience led to my research question: What is it about restructuring that principals find so perplexing, confusing and difficult to implement?

The data for this study came a set of unstructured in-depth interviews with 10 principals during my work in the School Leadership Program. I chose the narrative account or case as the form for representing my data. I developed what Eisner (1985) calls connoisseurship, knowing "how to look, to see and to appreciate" (p. 219). I used my connoisseurship to construct the interviews into narrative accounts that captured principals’ work in a way that would "ring true." Each interview was "distilled" to capture both the particular and the general and locate what was subtle, complex and important in what Eisner calls an "intelligible context" (p. 221). Each narrative account uses principals’ interpretations of actual events, and the voice of the principal. To guide the analysis of my cases I posed two questions:

- How are the dilemmas manifest in principals’ work? and
- How do principals deal with the dilemmas?

CASES

This paper contains three cases, illustrating each of the dilemmas, and constructed from interviews with principals whom I call Brendan, Joel, and Ralph.

Brendan and accountability

Brendan speaks of his struggle to be accountable in his relations with his staff, parents, and the system. When I spoke with him, Brendan wore a suit, dark blue and pressed carefully. His brisk, urbane manner, and his smart brief case and computer satchel looked out of place in the sombre surroundings of his school’s entrance. This was an old school building set in bushland in what was once the outskirts of the city. Now the school served a densely populated community with a high level of unemployment. The interview, conducted in the spring of 1995, took much longer than the hour I anticipated because of the many phone calls he received. While I waited I read his school’s development plan displayed in large print on the office noticeboard. I learned from Brendan that he was first appointed principal 8 years ago to a small primary school in the south west of the state. His current appointment was his third in the metropolitan area, all in priority schools.
Brendan and accountability

Life used to be more comfortable because the boundaries were clearer. We paid only lip service to accountability. The shift of power to schools makes us think about how the dollars are meeting our targets. But now the boundaries and goal posts keep moving.

I had a good working relationship with parents in country schools. My city schools have been in low socioeconomic areas. It is probably different in the leafy suburbs. But these parents are happy to stand shoulder to shoulder with you, to dig a hole. They’re happy to leave policy and school priorities to the school. They don’t want to be involved in educational issues. There are a few parents who are interested and we’ve tried to involve them. You hear people talking about school councils and greater parent participation. If we had a school council, we’d have to be accountable to parents. We’re feeling particularly uncomfortable because we were given power and now it’s going to be taken away.

I haven’t changed a great deal in relation to my staff. People are more aware of their rights, but the way I work and the rapport I have with staff hasn’t changed greatly. Staff have genuine input into decisions. Mostly, they make the decisions. The school development plan is developed cooperatively. It’s very real. Staff action the plan and are responsible for monitoring and reviewing it. All of those little things are delegated in a very systematic way through action planning sessions. Staff have formal roles to play. Names are put next to tasks to be done as well as the monitoring of the tasks. We don’t talk particularly about student outcome statements. I don’t think the statements are correct but the philosophy of student outcomes is very important. Staff have picked up on that, just in small ways.

We work on a very simple model of planning with three stages. Staff say, "Here are the outcomes I want to achieve. These are the strategies I’m going to use to achieve them. Here’s how I will measure whether I’ve achieved them." So we’re saying to teachers, "We trust you as professionals. That’s what teaching is all about. Just go and do it but make sure you get the outcome at the end of the day."

There’s far more delegation in schools now. I’ve been in this type of school for seven years. Priority schools have access to the dollars for special projects. We’re running three projects each with a director who makes sure the ball keeps rolling. Once you give people the authority to spend the dollars, you’re looking at true delegation. It becomes meaningful when people feel responsible. It’s the same with the school grant. We spend the money as we like and with whom we like. It’s also the same for policy making. You’d save a lot of time if you wrote it and told them that was the policy. But we go through a workshop and we think, "Well, we got the policy we wanted anyhow. But we went through the processes so the staff feel like they own it."

I function as an auditor to make sure things happen. We’re tackling things in a more professional way. We have performance indicators to measure our performance against. We have management information systems where we’re collecting information and responding to it professionally.
What's happened is a polarisation of power. Schools are given power and the central office also has power. Tasks and resources and the management of finances are delegated to schools. The Department's power lies in its very strong accountability mechanisms. We delegate authority in schools but the system doesn't really give us power. Mostly we are given managerial type things. For example, local selection of staff is a form of management. We're given the work of selecting and appointing staff, but don't have the authority to unselect them. So schools don't really have much power.

At the school level you can effect change. It's more difficult to effect change at a system level. The foremost agenda item for our principals' association is to work more closely as partners with the Department in decision making and policy setting. We've been talking to them about developing a policy for making policy. We want them to come up with a policy on how they consult people and how we can get into true partnership with them. The motive behind it is one of frustration. Principals are saying, "Hang on. We want to be involved as partners in making policy that affects schools." Some of the recent human resources policy is hard to wear. We have a lot of self-interest in HR decisions because they affect people's career paths and mobility. Performance management is an example. I could think, "This is great. My employer is giving me an opportunity to develop myself professionally." But I have a feeling of impending doom. Performance management is something they do to me, like hit me across the head with a big stick. We must be involved in making this sort of policy.

There's a certain degree of suspicion as well. Lots of agendas are lurking about, not quite on the table or shared terribly well. We got the Department's strategic planning documents when the policy was already decided. We want to be in there deciding with them. We've got to get it right.

It's time to start taking a helicopter view of the whole thing. We want to bring the bits together. Too often we're wasting our time. Here's a classic example. I spent half the day yesterday debating the amalgamation of funds for special programs. People were wondering where these funds would come from in future. I said, "We can only make recommendations on the basis of the status quo as we know it." I told them funding for special needs would be taken care of by differential resourcing in the future. But differential resourcing is not on the table. We can only tinker with the edges. We need to put the pieces of the puzzle together to get that helicopter view. The school grant has empowered us. We've had a sniff of power and we're thinking, "Give us more power."

To a large extent we're forcing ourselves on the Department. They're becoming more receptive. They can't work in isolation. They're there for schools and because of schools. We've made a good start but we've still got a long way to go.

We have more freedom and flexibility but there are still constraints. I've heard rumours about a board of registration for teachers, a board of studies for curriculum materials, and a centre for professional development. When there are things lurking out there, it's very difficult to develop your own vision. There's a trench mentality. You stay low in the trenches. Every now and then you put your head up to have a quick peek and then you duck back down again. And hope these things go away.
Brendan and accountability: An analysis

Brendan reveals his struggle with a range of issues around accountability. He seems to experience a tension between what he expects of the system and what he believes the system expects of him.

Brendan's relationships within his school seem to give him little cause for concern. He portrays a school that has balanced accountability and participation. In his description of his school's decision making processes, formal procedures enable staff collectively to take responsibility for decisions. He says that the message to teachers is, "Just go and do it but make sure you get the outcomes at the end of the day." He describes this as "true delegation." Teachers are trusted with authority to make decisions, and they are expected to take responsibility for the outcomes of their decisions.

However, there are other interpretations of what is happening in Brendan's school. He says, "We trust you as professionals." But what does it signify when he says, "I haven't changed a great deal in relation to my staff"? Moreover, he speaks of "those little things" that are delegated and the "small ways" in which teachers have picked up student outcome statements. He describes the planning processes he uses with staff as "a very simple model of planning." Delegation takes place "in a very systematic way through action planning sessions" in which staff are ascribed "formal roles to play." What is the significance of these assertions when he also states that, "we went through the processes so the staff feel like they own it." Are the current processes mere window dressing for accountability within relationships that remain unchanged?

Brendan insists that his staff have "genuine input into decisions" and that the school development plan is "very real." Perhaps his insistence on "true delegation" in his school serves to highlight his view of a discrepancy between his relationships within the school and his relationships in the wider context where "the boundaries and goal posts keep moving."

How does he portray his relationship with his school community? By and large, parents "don't want to be involved in educational issues" and so he tries to involve those few who show an interest. Parents in low socioeconomic areas are "happy to stand shoulder to shoulder with you, to dig a hole." However, increased involvement of parents makes him "uncomfortable" especially the prospect of being accountable to parents on a school council. Having to account to parents would mean that power was being "taken away."

How does he portray his relationships with the system? Rather than being given authority and responsibility, schools are mostly delegated "managerial type things." Schools have been delegated responsibility for selecting their own staff but, without the authority to fire staff, the tasks remains more like "work" than power. In the system context, schools are not included in decisions that affect schools. As he claims, principals "want to be involved as partners in making policy that affects schools." Nor, he claims, are principals included in decisions about issues that affect "people's career paths and mobility."

We might speculate on the reasons for Brendan's desire to be involved in system-level decision making when he is engaged in running his school. He claims it is difficult to bring about change at the system level. But why would he think it is his responsibility to do this? He argues that the motive is frustration. Brendan admits there is "a certain degree of suspicion." He claims that many agendas are "lurking about," "not quite on the table or shared terribly well." Many things are unknown to principals, making it difficult for them to plan or to develop a vision. Principals need to be involved in the system's policy making processes because, he believes, they need to know how to "put the pieces of the puzzle together." How else can the Department "get it right" if principals are not involved? Perhaps
principals want to be involved in system-level policy because they have grown to enjoy the power they already have. "We've had a sniff of power," he says, "and we're thinking, 'Give us more.'"

Brendan argues for greater principal participation in system-level decision making, so he can adopt a "helicopter view of the whole thing." What might he signify by his use of this metaphor? One interpretation might be that principals need to distance themselves from the everyday work of the school to gain a wider perspective of the system. Another interpretation of the helicopter metaphor is linked to its military associations. The helicopter view allows the territory to be surveyed and the enemy to be located. Brendan continues the military metaphor with his image of people staying "low in the trenches," surfacing occasionally "to have a quick peek." These images suggest a battlefield, with players on opposing sides. If he is engaged in such a battle, with whom does Brendan align himself and who is the enemy?

Brendan uses the pronoun "they" to signify two different kinds of other. When he speaks of his school he uses "they" to denote the staff who make decisions. Similarly, in his school context he speaks of parents as "them." However, when he says, "We're feeling particularly uncomfortable" about the prospect of parents having more power, is he placing himself as a member of the school staff or the cohort of school principals? His use of "we" in the context of his school sounds less like an alignment with staff or parents, to whom he refers as "they," and more like an allegiance with fellow principals. When he says, "We're saying to teachers, 'We trust you'" he implies allegiance to fellow principals. When he says, "If we had a school council, we'd have to be accountable to parents," he means that principals would be required to account to parents.

However, Brendan uses "they" to identify another kind of other, the system or Department, which is portrayed as the enemy who "doesn't really give [principals] power." When "we," the principals, received the Department strategic plan, "they" had not shared it with "us." In this interpretation, when he says, "We've had a sniff of power. Give us more" he speaks not on behalf of schools but of principals.

His authority comes from his relationship with his fellow principals and his interests lie in promoting the power of principals. Faced with pressures arising from two kinds of "them," the school staff and parents on the one hand, and the system on the other, he aligns with his colleagues among the principal cohort. The tension for Brendan seems to lie in being accountable to one kind of "them," the Department, and also trying to share decision making with the other "them," the school, when his allegiance rests with fellow principals.

Brendan's experience as a principal in this system seems to be characterised by frustration, ignorance and distrust. He is unable to make plans when what once seemed secure keeps changing. He responds by trying to influence what is happening in the system so that there is, for him at least, a clear direction. Perhaps he is attempting to achieve in the system what he has achieved for his staff when he turned complex and subtle planning and accountability processes into "simple steps" that provide certainty and direction in confusing and troubled times.

Joel and autonomy

Joel speaks of his struggle to find ways of working collaboratively with his staff when his career as a teacher, head of department, deputy principal and then principal in large secondary schools has been built on his reputation as a strong leader. For nearly all of his 35 years in schools, Joel held promotional positions and has been a principal of secondary schools for 20 years. When I arrived for the interview one autumn morning in 1994, Joel was
talking with a group of senior students in the quadrangle. He showed me the work currently underway to upgrade the library and music facilities. We sat in his office overlooking a garden of late blooming roses. The interview was punctuated by visits from a student, both deputy principals and a teacher.

Joel and autonomy

You’re caught in a cleft stick. Whichever way you go, you’ll always get criticised. I’ve always been a one man committee. I used to be on every committee and I attended every meeting. If we were going to have committee meetings, I wanted something out of them. I made sure there was something at the start. I prepared discussion papers. I pushed my ideas through. I wasn’t unwilling to listen to what others said but I didn’t want to waste time. I liked to be in control. I would never be outvoted by a committee. If I didn’t like the way a decision was going, I wouldn’t put it to the vote. I would have my say and I would decide. I was strong on my right of veto.

Ideas come and go in schools; things happen in cycles. I’ve been through many cycles. I know all the pitfalls. It saves time and hassles in the long run if I tell them, "Well, you’re going to have to face this, this, this and this." But they probably think, "He’s telling us it’s not going to work."

I’ve always enjoyed the nitty gritty work such as timetabling. I liked being a head of department and a deputy principal. I’m interested in the day-to-day organisation of the school. Things must be under control to operate smoothly. But I’m starting to back off. Now the deputies do the work and present it to me at the end. We go through it and I check it. Only rarely do things get changed.

I’ve always had a reputation as a strong principal. The superintendent knows this is a good school so he doesn’t have to check all the fine detail. He says, "If something was wrong I’d tell you." Some department heads say I’m the best principal they’ve worked with. They know I’m interested in what kids are learning. They understand they won’t get away with things. They know I’ll speak up when something’s wrong. When you’re not giving direction, you’re seen as a weak principal.

I started to think I was probably dominating meetings. I decided to back off a bit. I’d still get the minutes so I could look through them. I found I wanted to have my say in decisions committees had already made. One of my deputies reprimanded me. "Giving responsibility means letting the committee carry it through. Agree with their decision, let them run with it and learn from experience," she said.

I thought I was giving people more responsibility by not going to all the meetings. When teachers wanted to trial the new outcome-based approach I decided I wouldn’t get involved. The heads of the home economics, business studies and manual arts departments were trialing materials for the new student outcome statements in technology. I decided to let them have their head. But on the issue of reporting to parents I just had to step in. They had prepared a document to explain to parents the new approach to technology. When they asked me to comment on the document, I said it sounded woolly and represented looseness in their thinking. It wasn’t consistent with our existing reporting methods. I stopped them sending it home. I had no idea this caused a problem until the head of home economics came to my office and
said, quite bluntly, "We would have liked more support from you. You left us on our own. You didn’t know what was going on in the classrooms, what students were producing, how hard it was for us. You could have given us feedback as we went along rather than slamming us after we’d done all that work." She really wanted me to take responsibility for the trials.

I was happy with the progress of the home economics and business education departments but manual arts seemed not to have got very far. Manual arts teachers still like being in control, a bit like the shop floor. If there’s a job to be done, they know the best way to do it. They were pleased I hadn’t visited their classrooms. What worries me still is that they were the least involved in the trials and the most happy to be left alone.

In the past I was probably stifling people’s careers by not giving them opportunities to develop as leaders. Now I enjoy reading their applications for promotional positions. I get a kick out of feeling that I’ve let go of something that a teacher picks up and feels proud about. But sometimes I think others are taking over my job. For example, yesterday one deputy stood up in the staffroom and thanked the people in the swimming carnival before I’d even had the chance! I thought, "I should have done that. Why is he doing it?" I felt threatened. He seemed to be telling me I was not doing my job. The deputy is getting the respect for what’s happening rather than the principal. Your self-esteem suffers. You need a niche in the school that people appreciate. I thought, "Gee, who is the principal here?" At times you feel people are saying, "What’s he doing? Why isn’t he out there doing that? The principal’s not interested." I give people opportunities but it looks as though I’m not doing my job.

I want to be more involved in what students are doing, not just going to meetings and doing paperwork. After all, I went into teaching because I like kids. But now that I’m not on so many committees, I’m aware of less that’s happening around the place. I need to know what’s going on to make sure all decisions are made on educational grounds and not cost saving measures. I must be able to say, "This is the best solution for the kids given our resources." I need to know if things are getting out of kilter before anything drastic happens.

Even now, people like year-level coordinators come to my office and want me to dot every i and cross every t for them. I say, "Do you think it will work? Well, try it!" But they want confirmation that what they’re doing is right. I get impatient. I want to say, "You wouldn’t be in that position if we didn’t think you could do the job. It’s your responsibility. Go and do it your way and carry the can." Of course, I don’t say it so bluntly but that’s what I think. People want my stamp of approval. It frustrates me that when I delegate tasks, people run to me for reassurance. I can’t get it right whichever way I go.

Joel and autonomy: An analysis

In this case, Joel reveals his struggle to be a strong principal and to give others responsibility to make decisions. He grapples with the issue of control—letting go, backing off, stepping back and letting others "have their head."

What does Joel’s presence at meetings signify? On the one hand, his presence represents control and order in a complex busy school environment. Joel is firmly in charge, taking
responsibility for what is talked about, the way decisions are made and what is decided. He brings a wealth of information from his long experience as a school leader and teachers rely on him to provide solutions. The processes he uses to make meetings run smoothly also ensure the efficient use of time.

On the other hand, Joel fears he curtails teachers’ participation. He sees that the effect of presenting a paper for discussion is to direct the conversation. He acknowledges that he pushes his own ideas through. Although he is willing to listen to what others have to contribute, he admits he makes sure he has his say. However, "backing off" from meetings could be interpreted by teachers to mean that he is not interested in what happens. The head of home economics points out that his absence signifies his lack of knowledge of what they are doing: "You didn’t know what was going on in the classrooms." He wonders whether people are saying, "What’s he doing? . . . The principal’s not interested." By not attending meetings Joel intends to "let them have their head." By "stepping back" he sees himself giving people opportunities to do it their way. He wants to give people leadership experiences that they can use as evidence to support applications for promotion.

He struggles to balance the benefits to teachers against the problems he believes they will encounter when he does let go. He knows he can save them "time and hassles" by warning them of the pitfalls of wrong decisions. He knows he should let go more than he does. His deputy principal has reprimanded him for interfering with committee decisions made in his absence. He knows that warning teachers of all the pitfalls could imply a lack of confidence in them, that they might think, "He’s telling us it’s not going to work."

When Joel talks about not attending meetings, he says he feels he no longer knows what is happening in the school. Not knowing worries him because he fears that "something drastic might happen" if he is not aware of the danger signs. When he does not attend meetings, teachers come to him for reassurance. His presence at meetings gives his "stamp of approval" to what is decided.

Another aspect of his struggle to let go of control relates to his image. He worries that stepping back from meetings and allowing others to take responsibility adversely affects his image as a strong principal. He speaks of his concern that people will wonder, "Who is the principal here?" Joel describes himself as a strong principal. People know they "won’t get away with things." When others, such as deputies, step in to give direction, he fears he is seen as a weak principal.

An associated issue Joel confronts concerns his support for teachers. He talks about his commitment to the school’s educational program and his aim to ensure decisions are based on educational grounds rather than efficiency. He speaks of his concern about the manual arts teachers’ lack of progress with the trialing of student outcome statements. He knows something is wrong; they have made the least progress with the student outcome statements and are the least concerned with his lack of interest in them. So he is not sure what the problem really is. Although he knows he wants to increase his support, he doesn’t know how to intervene. He thinks that his former style of involvement in which he dominated discussions will not allow people “to have their head.” His alternative approach is to leave teachers alone to run with the trials without his interference. But how does he respond when teachers look to him for guidance? He has two responses when people ask for advice or approval. One is to tell them what to do. The other is to turn the responsibility back to them but to feel impatient that they are unable to assume responsibility. He is no longer confident that either of these two responses is right.

An alternative interpretation of Joel’s experience centres on his role in protecting teachers. By attending all meetings, he ensures they are conducted in a quick and efficient manner. In
times of change and uncertainty, his views bring clarity to the meeting and reassures participants that there is a "best solution." On the basis of his knowledge and experience, he can steer the discussion, even if it means "pushing his idea through." Even if his arguments fail to persuade, he uses his right of veto to prevent the committee from making unwise decisions. Not only does he protect teachers from protracted meetings, he also protects them from confusion, doubt and uncertainty.

Joel uses his store of knowledge about school issues to protect teachers. He looks after teachers’ interest by not wasting their time: he runs efficient meetings; he ensures decisions are wise; and he checks the work of his deputies to make sure the school is well organised and runs smoothly. But he recognises that teachers’ careers are being "stifled" by lack of access to leadership responsibilities. He realises that his new style will give them greater access to experiences useful to their careers.

In the light of this interpretation of Joel’s actions, it is not surprising that his staff were concerned when he "stepped back." The head of home economics reprimanded him, saying, "We would have liked more support from you. You left us on our own." Had he been involved he would have protected the teachers from "looseness of thinking" and their "woolly" report proposal. He would have helped them think confidently and lucidly through the problems to develop a reporting process that met the needs of the new outcome-based approach to technology and matched existing school reporting procedures.

In the role of protector of teachers’ welfare, he is visible in meetings and in the staffroom. By "stepping back" from his daily public profile, he leaves teachers wondering where the principal is: "What’s he doing? Why isn’t he out there doing that?" It is likely that they interpret his absence as a lack of interest in their welfare. It is also no surprise that they seek him out for reassurance. In place of his active participation in meetings, they now have to go to his office and seek "confirmation that what they’re doing is right." If his visibility signifies protection, his absence is likely to signify that he no longer cares.

From Joel’s point of view, sharing decision making means backing off and letting go of control. The way he backs off becomes a source of confusion for him. Letting go gives him time to support teachers in the classroom but not letting go allows him to maintain order, direction and certainty in the school. As Joel says, he is caught in a cleft stick.

Ralph and efficiency

Ralph tells of his struggle to find ways of working with his staff that are also efficient. I met Ralph in 1993 when he participated in the one School Leadership Program course he attended. I interviewed him in the winter of 1994. Our meeting was scheduled to start early in the day but when I arrived at the appointed time I had the feeling I was late. Ralph sat waiting for me, the bright sun sparkling across his tidy cleared desk. His brown woollen jacket hung neatly behind the door. He indicated to his assistants that he would not take any calls. From time to time during the interview he turned to the large cabinet adjacent to his desk and showed me budgets and plans he was preparing, papers filled with his close, regular pencilled script. I learned that this school catered for a middle class community in a prestigious beach side development. Of all the primary schools Ralph had run in his 18 years as a principal, none was as keenly sought as this school. Our hour’s conversation passed without interruption.

Ralph and efficiency

I’ve run schools for many years. I like being in charge but involving staff can work well. My staff here is stable, extremely competent, skilful, and motivated.
With them I use a problem solving approach. For example, when my music specialist left, the staff found the solution. The teachers decided to take music in their own classrooms. There was a push to introduce computers so we deployed Pamela, the Year 3 teacher, as a computer specialist. I recruited a high profile parent, a very good teacher, to take over Year 3. Later we got a full-time music specialist back. Pamela is still doing a wonderful job not only teaching computing across the curriculum but also maintaining the 20 computers. At the start parents said, "The computers are going to be clapped out in two or three years." Four years down the track, we haven’t lost one. The superintendent commended us on our program.

I deliberately involved staff in that decision. However, I take control of other things quite automatically. By the way I position myself in the staffroom I take control. Here’s a good example. My deputy principal was standing at the whiteboard, conducting the meeting. I took a chair and sat midway between her and the staff. Later, when I sat in a similar position at my church, I was accused of filtering the meeting. Then I understood what I was doing. It was my habit of taking the focal position. I didn’t need to say anything. It was a habit of putting myself in control.

I don’t always do it. At our quick Wednesday morning staff meetings I sit at the front with my deputies on either side. Our monthly afternoon staff meetings are run by staff members and I have a slot. I sit in the background and, when my slot comes up, I say my piece as quickly as I can and sit down again.

Being task oriented probably makes me seem controlling. I have four or five things I must do each week and one or two things I must do each day. I try to balance the big things with the small ones. If you only do the big ones, you become very inefficient. If you only do the little ones, the place has no direction. You need to be task oriented to get the right balance. But if I’m too rigid, teachers think, "Gee, Ralph’s working hard." So I don’t like to have my desk cluttered when they come in. I need to shed being task oriented. If teachers feel I’m too busy to listen to them, it’s a real barrier to their participation.

I used to be hell bent on my own agenda without recognising other people could have an agenda too. When I got my first appointment, the superintendent said, "Take your school by the scruff of its neck and make a difference. Don’t be satisfied just to empty your in-tray." I’ve always been single minded. I wouldn’t suffer interruptions. Another habit of mine is to close down conversations. My tone implies, "Well, that’s the end of it." The way I speak doesn’t encourage people to ask questions or to add to or doubt what I’ve said.

I’m starting to be aware of these habits. At a staff meeting I was trying to get teachers to identify a particular focus in the reading area. Whenever anyone gave a response that didn’t suit me, I cut them off saying, "That’s not really what we want." The Year 5 teacher said to me "Ralph, you’re very rude. Every time someone says something you jump down their throat." I apologised and the meeting took a new turn. Later I commended her on her courage. I come across in an authoritative manner, which I can’t help, but staff can challenge me.
The five years at this school have been very difficult. Parents' association meetings are a terrible power struggle. Many parents are involved in education. Some are teachers. Everyone knows more than I do about education. Everything's a debate. The constant vocal community is very wearing, even though it is healthy, lively discussion. It's hard to be in control. On the one hand, you've got all these highly motivated experienced teachers and, on the other hand, you've got all these extremely competent parents who know what they want for their school. And it's never what the teachers want. And I'm in the middle. At my first parents' association meeting there were 90 parents. I took a very high profile. I gave a 45 minute talk. Probably that was stupid. Probably it would have been sensible to take a low profile and let them run the show. By having too much to say for myself I set up confrontation. A more laid back person would handle it better than I do. That's why I'm leaving at the end of the year.

The principal is the meat in the sandwich. Your job is to balance all those competing and conflicting forces. The easy way is to say, "This is what has to happen" and you go ahead and do it. People say to me, "Ralph, you're too soft. Just tell them . . . ." The superintendent told me, "Make up your own mind. Dig your heels in." Graduation is a good example. Parents want a grand ceremony at night on a big stage. Teachers want something informal in the day in the school playground. They are poles apart. I have graduation at night to satisfy parents and I make it small to please teachers. It's still a running sore. The sports carnival is another example. The junior primary teachers, without exception, want a fun event. I have a long letter from a parent complaining that the carnival isn't competitive. I know the parent has a lot of support. I told her, "My teachers can run whatever sort of carnival they want." I completely abdicated responsibility for the issue. When you listen to your staff and you listen to your parents and they're at odds, it's very difficult.

I'm looking very hard at myself. Am I a fair person? Being compassionate is the biggest thing for a principal. It comes down to looking after your teachers. I used to think, parents, teachers, kids. Now I think, if you look after teachers, all the rest looks after itself. But I'm not sure how to be compassionate when my habit is to be in control. I'm at an interesting stage in my career.

Ralph and efficiency: An analysis

Ralph tells of his struggle to involve others in decisions and to be efficient. He wants to involve others but is thwarted by his habits of control.

Ralph's deliberate strategies for sharing decision making seem to work. For example, when he went to his staff to replace the music specialist, an innovative and effective solution was found. He has set up a process by which staff meetings are organised and chaired by staff. He sits "in the background" until his turn to speak and then he says his piece as quickly as he can and sits down again. What is signified by these examples? By enlisting the support of his staff to resolve the issue of replacing the music specialist, he indicates he respects and values teachers' ideas. Taking a low profile at staff meetings shows he trusts teachers to run meetings and take responsibility for decision making processes.

Although his deliberate strategies work well, Ralph seems to struggle with some of his behaviour which he claims is automatic. For example, without realising, he seats himself in a "focal position" in front of the group. He describes his way of speaking as one that discourages further discussion. When he uses a tone that implies, "That's the end of it,"
teachers are unwilling to question him. His "rigid" focus on task completion is another habit. He describes how he sets goals for the week and for the day and is "single minded" in their pursuit. When he first became a principal he was advised to take the school "by the scruff of its neck and make a difference." These behaviours seem to him unconscious and automatic. They signify a message to his staff that might be at odds with the message conveyed by his more deliberate strategies for interacting with staff.

His habits of control conflict with his more deliberate strategies. On the one hand, he indicates a willingness to involve others in problem solving and decision making; on the other hand, he signifies a preference to work alone, on his own goals and his own agenda. Although he established formal participatory mechanisms, perhaps his day-to-day interactions set him apart from the staff and reduce his engagement with them.

Ralph believes that, if he does not appear to be so busy at his cluttered desk, he will be able to listen to teachers. However, his experience of listening has not always produced a desirable outcome. He describes the issue of the graduation ceremony as a "running sore" that he was not able to resolve in his five years at the school. Parents wanted "a grand ceremony at night on a big stage" and teachers wanted "something informal in the day time in the playground." The expectations of parents and teachers were "poles apart." Although he made some compromises, he could not solve the problem. Listening to the competing interests of teachers and parents made him feel like "the meat in the sandwich" in a power struggle that he found "very wearing." Perhaps shedding the habit of control would not be the best response. After all, the superintendent told him to " . . . make up your own mind. Dig your heels in." Others told him he was "too soft" and recommended that he "just tell them . . . ." Balancing the conflicting interests may well be a worthy but unworkable goal. He might adopt the "easy way" and simply announce, "This is what has to happen." However, in such a declaration he would be reverting to the very controlling strategy he is trying to avoid. It is not surprising that he finds the idea of leaving the school at the end of the year an attractive course of action.

However, there are other habits of control he might shed. What would be the outcome of focusing less on task completion? Ralph speculates on these possibilities. The problem he sees if he were less task oriented is that he would become less efficient. He believes he needs to continue to be task oriented to maintain a balance between the big and the small jobs. Without a balance, the school would either lack direction or become inefficient. It is not surprising that Ralph finds this habit of control difficult to overcome. Shedding some of his habits of control leads to conflicting outcomes. On the one hand, being less task oriented might lead to increased participation in decision making which is a desirable outcome and, on the other hand, less efficiency which he sees as an undesirable outcome.

Another interpretation of Ralph's struggle with the dilemma of involving others and using resources efficiently is that his idea of efficiency encompasses a narrow range of resources. If he were to extend his understanding of the efficient use of time to include the time of others, he might not be content to allow the "running sore" of the graduation ceremony remain unresolved for five years. He might extend his understanding of efficiency to encompass the expertise, energy and commitment of his parents. He acknowledges that he has "extremely competent parents" who know a great deal about education, are actively involved in the parents' association and keen to participate in "healthy, lively discussion." Rather than viewing each meeting as a "terrible power struggle" where he finds it "hard to be in control" he might view his parent group as a valuable source of skills, knowledge and energy. Already he knows the staff is a valuable resource. They are "extremely competent, skilful, and motivated" and have demonstrated how well they could solve a staffing problem. Perhaps he could call on the expertise among parents and teachers to resolve the problem of the graduation ceremony instead of leaving them "poles apart" on this issue for five years.
Perhaps he is seeking the skills of negotiation to replace some of his habits of control. His pursuit of efficiency around task completion renders him less efficient in dealing with larger conflicts between the interests of teachers and parents. Although his emphasis on efficiency provides orderliness in a busy, demanding work setting, without a uniting core of values he leaves teachers and parents to flounder as he takes up a position in another school.

DISCUSSION

The discussion shows how the dilemmas are manifest in the work of the three principals and how principals deal with the dilemmas.

How is the accountability dilemma manifest in the cases?

Accountability is the focus of Brendan’s dilemma and appears to be an issue for both Joel and Ralph. Brendan believes he involves teachers in decision making in his school and seeks greater participation for principals in the system. He struggles with the constraints of system-imposed policies and agitates for more influence for his fellow principals. Although he expects his staff to follow the strong lines of accountability he has set up in his school, he struggles with system expectations because he is suspicious of decision making processes from which principals are excluded. For both Joel and Ralph, being in control makes it easy to be accountable. The difficulty arises when responsibility is shared. Joel takes full responsibility and protects teachers when he participates in decisions. Similarly, Ralph likes his autonomy. Being in control suits his personal style; indeed, it is his habit. When he is not in control, he abdicates all responsibility and does not feel he can be held accountable for his school’s decisions.

How is the autonomy dilemma manifest in the cases?

Autonomy is the focus of Joel’s dilemma but is evident in the dilemmas of both Brendan and Ralph. Joel’s store of knowledge about the day-to-day operations of schools allows him to tell teachers what to do and what to avoid in a myriad of situations, but this kind of strength leads to dependency. Joel demonstrates, too, that protecting teachers sometimes looks like support but can also look like domination. Brendan shows that being strong in the pursuit of power in the wider system is frustrating for principals although he does not question his own relationships with staff and parents. Ralph demonstrates that, without clearly articulated values, he flounders in indecision. His strong focus on task completion seems to get in the way of negotiating with staff and parents solutions to complex problems.

How is the efficiency dilemma manifest in the cases?

Efficiency is the focus of Ralph’s dilemma and appears to be an issue for both Brendan and Joel. Ralph finds that working alone allows him to be him more efficient than sharing decisions and listening to others. He notices that involving others can help him solve his problems. Equally, though, listening to others can generate problems for which he has no solutions. For Brendan, both participation and efficiency are ensured by formal school structures and processes. He has set up formal planning processes, performance indicators, and management information systems in which staff have systematically ascribed roles to play. Joel, on the other hand, is confident that his participation in decision making is necessary for efficient outcomes. His participation is a form of protecting teachers. He is happy to involve others in decisions, provided he is in control. For Joel, efficiency is associated with his participation, and his control; inefficiency results when he withdraws.

What do these cases reveal about the issues confronting principals as they deal with the dilemmas?
In dealing with the accountability dilemma requiring them to be both accountable and
democratic, trust appears to be a critical ingredient for principals. When principals are in
control, they trust that the right decisions are made. With principals in control, staff are
confident that decisions balance the efficient use of resources with the well-being of
students. When principals step back and allow others to take responsibility, principals feel
they cannot be held accountable.

In dealing with the autonomy dilemma requiring principals to be both autonomous and
collaborative, decisiveness is important. Conflict avoidance, efficiency, orderliness have less
legitimacy as a basis for negotiating complex problems and do not provide a context for
meaningful participation.

In dealing with the efficiency dilemma requiring principals to be both efficient and
collaborative, principals favour efficiency. It is quicker to decide alone. Furthermore,
principals can protect teachers from time consuming and cumbersome decision making
processes. Working collaboratively takes unnecessary time and can interfere with the
smooth running of the school. Principals like to take responsibility because they believe this
is what teachers expect of them. If they step back and give teachers responsibility, they feel
they are letting teachers down.

This is a study of what principals find so difficult about restructuring. Participation lies at the
heart of restructuring. The rhetoric is that schools will improve by being responsive to local
needs and that these needs can best be attended to when the local community is involved in
decision making. In place of a highly centralised arrangement in which schools had few
discretionary powers, resources are allocated to schools together with the authority to
decide how best these are used. However, principals are expected to operate within two
sets of constraints: one is to set up and use participatory decision making structures and the
other is to work within centrally defined policies.

Participation is central to school restructuring but it is also what makes restructuring so
difficult. When faced with choices between accountability and participation, principals chose
accountability. When faced with autonomy or collaboration, they chose autonomy. Similarly,
efficiency takes precedence over participation.

Why is participation difficult for principals? There are a number of reasons. Schools are
bureaucratic institutions which emphasise the rational-legal authority that is linked to
position, policies, rules, regulations, and procedures (Blase et al., 1995). Notwithstanding
attempts to make their work routine, systematic, and predictable, principals' work is complex
and characterised by brevity, variety, and fragmentation (Mintzberg, 1973). Gaining and
maintaining control over everyday activities is a strategy for dealing with the complexities of
school life. Two strands of literature foster what Blase and his colleagues (1995) call the
rational-control orientation of principals. One is the school effectiveness literature of the
1970s and 1980s (for example, Purkey & Smith, 1983) focusing on school improvement. The
other is the educational administration literature with its epistemological basis in a scientific
view of administration (for example, Simon, 1950; Taylor, 1911). Both strands of literature
carry a message of rationality and law-like generalisation. Although some writers (for
example, Fullan, 1991; Greenfield, 1984) have attempted to disturb this assumption of
rationality by directing academic attention toward the messy nature of schools, change, and
organisational life in general, the rational-control orientation of principals persists. Even
when direct means of influencing decision making has limited success because of teachers’
resistance, less direct methods such as cultural and symbolic forms of influence are
advocated (Bowman & Deal, 1994; Sergiovanni, 1984). Much of the literature on principal
effectiveness shows that control is a dominant form of decision making in which principals
use a power-over approach to influence others (Blase et al., 1995). Against this background
of rational-control orientation, it is not surprising that principals struggle to involve others in decision making.

Another reason why participation is difficult for principals to achieve seems to be their preoccupation with decisiveness. Why are principals concerned about decisiveness? Decisiveness is a central issue in a culture characterised by presentism, individualism, and conservatism (Lortie, 1975). Teachers learn to be fair, firm and quick, making decisions on the run, alone, and on the basis of what works best for them. Orderliness and predictability are as important for principals as for teachers. Principals aim to turn chaos into order, making rules to cover all contingencies, and setting up structures to reduce uncertainty. Against a background of orderliness, certainty, efficiency, and expediency, it is not surprising that principals are challenged by the untidiness of shared decision making.

The problem of participation for principals can be conceptualised in terms of a collision of two competing cultures, one based on an ethic of responsibility and one based on an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982, 1994). School administration with its emphasis on professional obligations, planning and improvement appears to be underpinned by an ethic of responsibility (Hargreaves, 1994). Being strong is depicted as being assertive and in control, and in taking active responsibility for others. Principals guided by the ethic of responsibility respect the rights of teachers and protect them from whatever would interfere with exercising their rights. This form of control over others is what Blase and his colleagues (1995) describe as the power-over approach.

In contrast, an ethic of care is guided by the principle of attachment. The central image is the web. People wish to be at the centre of connection and fear feeling stranded when they are left out on the edge. The ideal of care is an activity of relationship, seeing and responding to need (Gilligan, 1982). If the ethic of responsibility is characterised by dependency and inequality, then the ethic of care is characterised by "interdependency and interconnection" (p. 166). If the ethic of responsibility is related to power-over, then the ethic of care is related to facilitative-democratic leadership (Goldman, Dunlap & Conley, 1993) or a power-through approach (Blase et al., 1995).

The problem of participation for principals is that the collaborative arrangements they establish seem to be based more on the ethic of responsibility than on the ethic of care. Yet more of the values underpinning the ethic of care seem to be required of participation.
REFERENCES


