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School leaders as mediators of school reform

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Abstract:

School leadership is highly significant in determining teachers' levels of commitment to and engagement with new initiatives and reforms (Day, 2000; Fullan, 2002; Louis, 1998). School leaders are considered to be the interpreter and the connector between the school's and the system's goals and priorities and specific teacher practice. This paper investigates the role that school leaders play as mediators between system and school priorities and teachers' commitment and engagement.

This paper reports on an Australian study into how school leaders influence teacher commitment and engagement. Most of the teachers interviewed in this study reported high levels of commitment. The difficulty was that, in many cases, this commitment remained at a very personal level. This means that their commitment was idiosyncratic and was not linked, in the main, to system and school priorities. If system and school priorities are to become more significant drivers for teacher practice then those priorities need to be more clearly linked to teachers' commitment, which is founded on their values and beliefs. School leadership is seen as a key factor in making and maintaining those connections for teachers.

This paper discusses the findings of the study and proposes a conceptual professional development framework to assist school leaders to formulate, critique and reconstruct specific strategies. The findings have particular significance for leadership in terms of future change directions.

Introduction:

I think principals have the hardest job. They're the first and the last stop for everybody. They have to deal with everything.

(Teacher Interview 20, Paragraph 49)

The role of the school leader is a difficult and complex one as identified by the above teacher. The school leader carries the dual accountability to both the education system and the school on their shoulders. Within the current change agenda school leaders find themselves increasingly caught between the needs and imperatives of the education system and the pressing demands and reality of everyday school life. There is much made of the intensification of the teachers role, where there has been 'bureaucratically driven escalation of pressures, expectations and controls concerning what teachers do and how much they should be doing within the teaching day' (Hargreaves, 1994:108). In a similar vein the role of school leader has also undergone a so-called 'intensification' in recent years, becoming increasingly complex and at the same time constrained by bureaucratic accountability and system imperatives (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1998). School leaders currently appear to be caught between the external demands of the system and the internal demands of the school.

The increasing pace of the current reform agenda has led to schools being continually flooded with systemic demands. Within this climate school leaders are more often than not merely attempting to implement externally driven change rather than lead internally initiated reform. These constant external demands contribute greatly to the 'intensification' of school leaders roles. School leaders are placed in the position of implementing new ideas from the system which are not only fragmented but all too often have 'short shelf lives' where they discarded in favour of the latest 'hottest' policy (Fullan, 1998).

In a climate such as this it is not enough for leaders to be effective in what Fink and Resnick's (2001) advocate as instructional leadership, aimed at just improving things such as student performance within the school. Instead school leaders who aim to thrive and not just survive within this climate of enforced reform need to be concerned with their leadership having a much wider and longer lasting influence. Fullan (2002) argues that today's leaders need to be able to "create a fundamental transformation in the learning cultures of schools and the teaching profession itself" (p14). Principals who are concerning themselves with the notions of sustainable change and the development and maintenance of learning communities appear to be having the most success initiating long-term change within their schools. However, for school leaders to initiate and maintain such reforms they need to firstly engage their staff and get the teachers in some way committed to the change process.

This paper investigates this crucial relationship between school leadership and teacher commitment and engagement and the possible issues arising from this for effective and sustained school renewal.

The significance of teacher commitment:

Teacher commitment has been identified as one of the most critical factors in the success and future of education (Huberman, 1997, Nais, 1981). It contributes to teachers' work performance, absenteeism, burnout and turnover, as well as having an important influence on students' achievement in, and attitudes toward school (Firestone, 1996; Graham, 1996; Louis, 1998; Tsui & Cheng, 1999). Commitment is considered to be part of a teacher's affective or emotional reaction to their experience in a school setting (Ebmeier & Nicklaus, 1999). It can be seen to be part of a learned behaviour or attitude associated with the professional behaviour of teachers. From these affective reactions to the school setting, teachers make decisions (both consciously and subconsciously) about their level of willingness to personally invest to that particular setting, or particular group of students.

Teachers' commitment is thought to decrease progressively over the course of their teaching career (Fraser, Draper & Taylor, 1998; Huberman, 1993). At the beginning of a teachers' career, there is an early stage of commitment to teaching associated with the choice of professional identity, followed by a stage of experimentation and search for new challenges, teachers often experience a stage of conservatism and which can lead to eventual disengagement (Huberman, 1993). This transition from an enthusiastic engagement with the profession to a more distanced and limited engagement, reduces a teacher's willingness to reform classroom practice, engagement in whole school initiatives and levels of participation in extra-curricula activities. A decrease in commitment levels during the course of the teaching career is also problematic in relation to the retention of experienced teachers in the classroom. However, some Australian research suggests that this pattern may not necessarily hold true for teachers in rural schools. Boylan and McSwan (1998) found that teachers who had served in rural schools for more than six years reported a high level of commitment to teaching which appeared to increase as teaching experience increased.

The level of teachers' commitment is seen as a key factor in the success of current educational reform agenda as it heavily influences teachers' willingness to engage in cooperative, reflective and critical practice.

An Australian study:

This study by Elliott and Crosswell (2002) investigated the relationship between school leadership and teacher commitment and engagement. Data was collected

through the use of semi-structured interviews, which were then transcribed. Over sixty teachers and twenty principals were interviewed individually. The data was collected from Australian preschool, primary, secondary and special education schools in suburban, regional and rural settings. It is thought that collecting data from a variety of educational settings and from a range of geographical contexts will reflect some of the current teaching experiences in Australia.

From the raw data, six schools were selected as case studies. Each case was selected for its ability to contribute something new to the collective understanding of the relationship between school leadership and teacher commitment and engagement in different educational settings (Patton, 1990). Each school case study was constructed primarily through an analysis of the interviews with selected teachers in the school and the school principal. Incidental data such as informal discussions and observations were used to elaborate ideas and confirm issues arising.

Specifically, the analysis focused on identifying the following;

- Major conceptions of teacher commitment held by the individual
- School leadership factors that may sustain or diminish commitment and engagement
- Other factors that may sustain or diminish commitment and engagement
- Changes to levels of engagement

It is felt that this research is pragmatically significant for its findings can be used in discussion and planning by educational leaders and systems on ways to support school leaders in enhancing teacher engagement in the reform process.

Although there were a number of significant findings arising from the study, this papers' discussion will focus on two of the major findings that are significant to the current discourses on school reform and effective implementation of change. These two findings are:

- Teachers report that their levels of commitment and engagement are diminished (rather than enhanced) by system factors.
- School leadership impacts significantly on teachers' commitment and engagement levels. In schools where school leaders interpret the larger ideas, connecting these to teacher understanding and practice, teachers' report high levels of commitment and engagement.

(Elliott & Crosswell, 2002: 5)

To discuss the relevance of these particular findings; the two major sub-headings will be used.

System Factors: a case of 'overload'

Of all the factors that the interviewed teachers indicated as diminishing their commitment and engagement levels, many of these could be contributed to systemic issues. These issues revolve around the reform agenda and include: the rate of change, the lack of time to adapt to change and the change process itself. One of the pervading perceptions held by this group is that so called 'new' policies and ideas

are really just 'tried and true' strategies that have been re-packaged and jargonised, as two interviewees discuss;

You often hear, "we've had this (reform) before; and now we're getting it again, and you can call it anything you like, but it's still English or – whatever".
(Teacher Interview 17, Paragraph 322)

A lot of what the department does is try and sell us "NEW" things that we've been doing for a long time. Even most of the New Basics stuff has been known for a long time. A lot of teachers realized a long time ago that kids develop at different rates.

(Teacher Interview 3, Paragraph 71)

Accompanying this concern about the pace of change and the change process itself is a suspicion about the underlying political agendas that are driving current reform. Some of the interviewees believe that the policy of 'change for change sake' is not benefiting either the students or teachers, as outlined below;

Very rarely when new things come in do you think, "this is really going to help me with my practice". It is not so much that I don't like change because that's not the problem, but it seems that the department is imposing stuff on us to get more votes to make their bureaucratic process work better. It is not for the kids, or for us.

(Teacher Interview 26, Paragraph 72)

There also appears to be a high level of frustration amongst both the Principals and the teachers with the apparent lack of professional development and support for the implementation of these new initiatives.

...the internet training and the Literacy in-service - I think they were probably the only two things that I can think of that the Department really in-serviced very thoroughly and very well. I get very cranky with them when they sort of say, "Oh, well, here is the new syllabus, we expect everyone to start using it". Then there is no in-service except on-line and look what happened last year! No one could get online, so it all fell into a heap.

(Teacher Interview 20, Paragraph 235)

Other systemic factors that are raised include: disassociation from the department and its' goals, class sizes, facilities, the transfer system, and the lack of opportunities and recognition for teachers who want to stay in the classroom.

Many of the interviewees discussed ambivalence or apathy on the part of the system to teachers' individual commitment levels. There were some participants who did believe that the system was concerned about teacher commitment. However, this group felt that this concern was not being acted upon, with little or no systemic support structures for teacher commitment.

Importance of school leadership in addressing systemic overload

School factors and issues also featured prominently amongst the factors that diminish commitment and engagement. This, it is felt, emphasises the importance and influence of school leadership within the school context which is discussed later in this paper.

The fact that system initiatives are often cast in negative terms by teachers was also noted in discussions with Principals. They felt that schools are often concentrating

on “surviving” the change process while dealing with immediate questions of community needs, and so, have little time to digest any details.

The role of school leaders in casting change, not as *cumulative work*, but *reconstructed work*, is highly significant. In other words, change needs to be seen by school leaders and the teachers, not as additional work to be done, but alternative work.

We now address the second finding which conceptualises the role of the school leaders as an interpreter of change issues. This role is seen as highly significant in addressing the negative impact of system priorities.

School Leadership: making connections

School leadership impacts significantly on teachers’ commitment and engagement levels. This appears to be well recognised by many of the interviewed teachers and Principals, as discussed below;

....I worked under a Principal who was just totally supportive, totally right there with you, and you knew that you were supported. You could do anything and that was really motivating. You could go to them, ask them questions, and you knew that you were going to get help or suggestions to fix things yourself.

(Teacher Interview 24, Paragraph 454)

I think with teacher commitment, you need to be able to look to the Principal of the school. You need to have strong leadership from your Principal

(Teacher Interview 25, Paragraph 330)

From the schools in the study where the school leaders interpret the larger ideas from the system, and connected these to teacher understanding and practice, teachers report high levels of commitment and engagement. This concept of the school leader continuing to re-direct and focus teachers on certain ideas is taken up by one of the teachers;

I think the leadership in the school is crucial. We have someone who keeps bringing us back to certain values that she believes are important in the running of the school. We have a philosophy at our school about giving everyone a fair go, being accountable, about being transparent, about the social justice side of things. Our Principal keeps bringing us back to these core things with the issues that come up. It helps me remember what we are trying to do - in a big picture way.

(Teacher Interview 26, Paragraph 49)

A number of the schools included in the study had invested time into discussing and, or, documenting, the teachers’ personal values, interests and abilities. These schools have a strong foundation from which they could then move onto connecting these personally held views with bigger ideas, such as, school initiatives, system reforms and contemporary educational ideas. An example of a strong foundation is the case study of Willowbark Primary;

Willowbark Primary has established a strong shared philosophy across the school, to which most of the teachers appear to be committed. The teachers

also have a shared understanding of what it means to be committed, centering on the notion of “caring” for students. These two common factors give the staff at Willowbark a solid shared foundation on which to discuss their practice, school goals and future reforms.

(Elliott & Crosswell, 2002: 43)

The question of school leaders interpreting significant issues is obviously important for the whole system. As new initiatives are developed and implemented, school leaders will need assistance so that they themselves understand the key ideas and implications for them and their school. Thus, inherent in this finding is the importance of school leaders as the lynchpin between system priorities and teacher practice. Thus, the system needs to recognise the need for appropriate strategies to support school leaders in understanding system priorities. Principals with whom discussions were held, supported this idea.

School leaders, themselves, adopt a range of strategies that assist in this process. For example, many of the effective principals appear to investigate, or delegate a representative to investigate the bigger ideas. These include: current education philosophies and practices, new reforms and system initiatives. These school leaders explicitly establish links between these large external ideas and their particular school context and vision and their staff values and practice. They discuss with their staff how these ideas address school needs or directions, and how they relate to current teacher practice and therefore, teachers’ values and beliefs. By doing this these principals appear to foster engagement with the reforms and therefore, support and enable the process of change and reform for their staff.

Importance of school leadership in engaging teachers

School leadership as the connector between the system’s goals and priorities and specific teacher practice was found to be highly significant in determining teachers’ levels of engagement. Most of the teachers interviewed in this study reported high levels of commitment. The difficulty was that, in many cases, this commitment remained at a very personal level. This means that their commitment could be defined as ‘idiosyncratic’ and, in the main, was not connected to system and school priorities. If system and school priorities are to become more significant drivers for teacher practice then those priorities need to be more clearly linked to teachers’ commitment, which is founded on their values and beliefs.

Teacher commitment and professional identity are closely linked to teachers’ personal and professional values and beliefs. These beliefs are complex and ‘messy’, but central to commitment (Pajeres, 1992). They are formed at an early life stage (Rokeach, 1968; Lortie, 1975), are structured as networks of assumptions (Kitchener, 1986), act as filters to new ideas and knowledge (Posner, Strike, Hewson & Gertzog, 1982; Schommer, 1990), and are extremely difficult to modify or change (Lortie, 1975; Lewis, 1990; Wilson, 1990). Teacher beliefs, Lortie (1975) contends, are well established even before a teacher enters the teaching profession. Therefore, the connection between professional identity, teacher beliefs and teacher commitment is complex and intimate. Thus, it is unlikely that such values can be easily influenced. Instead, they need to be actively linked with school and system priorities. Hence, this study suggests that the key initiatives for school leaders should revolve around;

- Identifying key ideas/ policies/ contemporary ideas
- Connecting these to the value positions held by the teachers

Therefore, school leadership plays a significant role as the connector between the system's goals and priorities and specific teacher practice and engagement. A more overt and explicit connection needs to be made for teachers between their personal values and beliefs and school and system priorities. This connection appears to be made easily when the teachers see that priorities and goals align with what they hold to be personally valuable. However, for the priorities that are in some degree of conflict with teachers' personal values and beliefs, it is the role of the school leader to find ways to interpret and make possible connections for these teachers.

Concerning the issue of identifying priorities some school leaders have indicated that they need assistance and support in fully understanding system priorities (this has not been a focus of this study, but an issue arising from it). There is an indication that some school leaders feel that they need further direction and scaffolding to effectively interpret the system priorities for their particular school contexts and their individual staff members.

In regards to the issue of making links with teachers, school leaders need to develop strategies that are relevant to their particular context. Elliott and Crosswell (2002) identify many such strategies but they should be seen only as exemplars of what some principals have adopted. While there are some generic ideas, such as developing knowledge of teachers' backgrounds, beliefs, aspirations, personal goals etc., the specific strategies by which this occurs is obviously dependent on the principal, the school and its setting.

We now outline a proposed professional framework for school leaders to assist them in making connections between 'big ideas' and their staff, in an effort to enhance teacher engagement.

A proposed framework for enhancing teacher engagement:

For fostering and maintaining commitment and engagement the principal is seen as highly significant. Specifically, it was noted that in those contexts where the school leaders were interpreters of the larger ideas, connecting these to teacher understanding and practice that commitment was relatively high and the teachers were engaged in practices that were mutually supportive. The most success appeared to be had by school leaders where this collaborative process of identification and connection was not just implied, but made explicit and transparent to the teachers. All staff in such situations seemed to feel that they have contributed in some way and that they are kept informed.

Because change is often seen as separate fragmented sets of ideas, it is not surprising that teachers find it difficult to perceive any sense of coherence in the system priorities. Also, and perhaps because of this, teachers and school leaders, often report feelings of isolation from these priorities.

As a consequence, change is often seen in terms of just adding to an already excessive workload. The result is inevitably diminished engagement in priorities. The twin issues of fragmentation and isolation need to be contrasted with their counterparts of interpreting and forming connections.

Thus the ideas of "identifying key ideas" and "making connections for teachers" seemed to be highly significant. We have been able to identify sets of these and we believe that they cluster around five types of identification/connection practices.

Because these five types are global and do not carry any specific actions we have called them **School Leadership Initiatives**. These are global strategies that have relevance in all school settings, irrespective of type, size, location etc.

This study identifies five generic **School Leadership Initiatives**. They are;

- Identifying a whole school vision or philosophy and then establishing connections between this and their teachers' values and beliefs.
- Identifying contemporary educational ideas and then establishing connections between these with teachers' roles and practices.
- Identifying a strategic plan for the school and establishing connections with teachers' capacity to achieve these goals.
- Identifying a transparent and collaborative culture of decision making and establishing connections with teachers' feelings of ownership and responsibility.

The strategies associated with them are influenced by the contextual factors of the particular setting. These include;

- Size of the school.
- Principal personality characteristics, leadership style and experience.
- Social context, geographical location and unique culture of the school community.
- Staff profile, including; demographics, values, beliefs and experiences.

Following is a proposed framework for school leaders. It outlines how the generic School Leadership Initiatives relate to these contextual features. It is felt that such a framework can be used by school leaders to:

- (a) analyse their current practices
- (b) discuss current practice with colleagues and supervisors
- (c) create personal vision for their own practice
- (d) discuss their roles with teachers in the school
- (e) discuss the similarities and differences between their practices and those of their colleagues.

Contextual Features		Global Initiatives				
		School Leadership Initiatives : Identify and Connect				
		Identify: school vision	Identify: contemporary ideas	Identify: strategic plan	Identify: culture of decision making	Identify: a school-staff community
Questions	Examples	Connect: teachers' values and beliefs	Connect: teachers' values and beliefs	Connect: teachers' values and beliefs	Connect: teachers' values and beliefs	Connect: teachers' values and beliefs
How big is the school?	School size					
What are the Principal's characteristics?	Principal personality characteristics, experience, and leadership style					
What is the school like?	Context, location and culture					
What is the staff like?	Staff profile, demographics, values and beliefs, and experience					

Conclusions:

This paper has discussed two of the major findings identified by Elliott and Crosswell (2002). These findings could be considered to be highly significant to the current school reform discourse. One of these findings discusses the negative impact on both teacher commitment and engagement by the reform agenda. Many teachers report that they are demoralised by the pace and amount of change being enforced by the system. These teachers feel that the systemic reform agenda is having a significant and negative influence both on the levels of their commitment and their willingness to engage with school priorities and goals.

However, the more significant of the two findings centres on the notion that this climate of change and the ensuing negative reaction of the teaching population demands that school leaders interpret the current 'big ideas' and make connections for their teachers. One significant issue that is raised by this research is the need for school leaders to address the above challenge. It is not a simple task and Elliott and Crosswell (2002) identify that there does not exist a 'toolbox' of set strategies or a 'recipe' of processes to ensure success. Instead, it appears that each leader needs to look at their individual school context and their particular staff to try and create connections between school and system goals and their teachers' values and beliefs. If school leaders can create contexts in which teachers can incorporate school and system priorities into their very personal views of commitment, then schools may be able to effectively sustain change that is supported by both teachers and leaders.

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