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## **Flight steward or co-pilot? An exploratory study of the roles of middle-level school leaders in the non-state sector**

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### **Abstract**

The principalship in Australia and elsewhere has been the focus of considerable research in the past few decades. Less well researched have been those holding middle-level leadership and management positions in schools, such as deputy principals, heads of school and so on (Kaplan & Owings, 1999; NCSL, 2003). Recent work by Cranston, Tromans and Reugebrink (2004) suggested that those holding such middle-level leadership positions in schools, certainly in the state secondary sector, were struggling with what could be termed a reconceptualisation of their positions. One of the acknowledged limitations of this earlier study was that it was confined to state schools only, raising the question as to whether similar findings and struggles might be evident for those in non-state sectors of schooling in Australia. The research reported here is a first exploratory step in addressing this question as it reports data from middle-level school leaders in the non-state sector in Queensland and New South Wales. It suggests that many such leaders, like their counterparts in the state sector, are struggling with challenges to, and a reconceptualisation of, their roles. Of note, is that their potential leadership contribution to their schools is unrealised. Using an aircraft analogy, rather than working as co-pilots in their schools, they are actually working more like flight stewards. Recommendations for further research emerge from the findings.

### **Introduction**

Schools across the globe have been subjected to frequent and varied reforms and restructurings across the past few decades. In response to those changes, the roles and responsibilities of schools leaders have been affected. Not surprisingly, researchers have shown a keen interest in the evolving role of the principal as the designated prime leader in schools (the list of authors examining and writing about this area is exhaustive, but Bennett & Anderson, 2003; Cranston, 2002; Gronn, 2003 and Gunter, 2001 provide some useful insights). However, other designated school leaders, with various titles such as deputy principals, assistant principals, heads of school (e.g. junior, middle), deans of study and so on, have attracted less research interest (National College of School Leadership, 2003.) Indeed, the National College of School Leadership (NCSL) noted “... that the international literature pertaining to assistant and deputy headteachers is substantially smaller than that relating to headteachers or principals” (p. 2). Other writers, such as Harvey and Sherdian (1995, p. 90), noted the deputy principalship as remaining “... one of the least understood roles in the schools of contemporary education systems”. Jayne (1996) looked at the role in the UK, while Marshall’s (1992, p. vii) work in the USA focused on addressing the “... often ignored and sometimes maligned” position of the assistant principal in a major work in the early nineties. It is this set of leaders “below” the principal that is the focus of this paper.

Earlier research into the role of deputies by Harvey (1994) suggested the possibility of an interest growing in Australia in such positions, but it was not until a more recent study by Cranston, Tromans and Reugebringk (2004) that any in-depth work in one system and type of school in Australia, at least, was available. However, this study was limited by the fact that it focused on data from middle-level school leaders from the state schooling sector only, begging the question of how such data might look for similar school leaders in the non-state sector. Some answers to this question, at least in an exploratory sense, are now available from middle-level school leaders in Queensland and New South Wales and are reported here.

## **Research approach**

### Focus of the research

The specific questions for this study were:

- how satisfied are middle-level school leaders in the non-state sector with their current position?
- what are some of the general characteristics surrounding their roles, such as degree of pressure, time spent and variety of work done?
- is there role alignment between what they actually do in their role (the *real*) and what they would like to do in a preferred situation (the *ideal*)?
- what skills and abilities do middle-level school leaders see as critical to carrying out their roles?

### Instrumentation

The *Roles of School Leaders Questionnaire* (RSLQ) for this research used a slightly modified form of the *Secondary Deputy Principal Questionnaire* (SDPQ) used earlier (Cranston et al, 2004). Both instruments were designed around:

- key messages from a review of the available literature (eg. Harvey, 1994; Garrett & McGeachie, 1999);
- the position description for deputy principals in state schools in Queensland and other formal statements about such roles (such as the 'Standards Framework for Leaders' [Education Queensland 1997]); and,
- concepts from a similar study into the roles and workloads of secondary principals (Cranston, Ehrich & Billot, 2003).

The RSLQ contained 26 closed items, about half of which contain several sub-sections within each item; 4 open-ended items providing the opportunity for explanation of specific closed item responses; 1 specially targeted open-ended items; and 1 general open-ended item. It was anticipated the questionnaire would take about 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

### Sample for the non-state sector study

The sample for the study comprised two elements. The first from respondents in Sydney (New South Wales), the second from Brisbane (Queensland) non-state schools. Each of these samples was somewhat serendipitously established as the researcher was undertaking some consultancy work with the two groups separately, but within months of each other. Each group comprised a similar profile of middle-level leaders, but from the non-state school sector, as that of the earlier study. Such samples are described as accidental or purposive (Hopkins & Glass, 1978; Kerlinger, 1973). They do not fit with the traditional random sample notions, but result from efforts to "obtain representative samples by including ... typical groups in the sample ... one

takes available samples at hand (Kerlinger, 1973. p. 129). Kerlinger noted that while not ideal, such samples, when used with caution, are "... probably not as bad as it has been said" (p. 129). They are not uncommon in many areas of research where one takes samples as they "... present themselves". In light of these characteristics of the sample, the research is considered exploratory in nature.

### Profile of respondents

Forty-six middle-level school leaders in mainly P-12 schools in the non-state sector in Queensland and New South Wales completed the instrument, *The Roles of School Leaders Questionnaire* in late 2004. Of those, 30 (65%) were based in NSW schools and 16 (35%) were based in Queensland schools.

The majority of respondents (85%) worked in a combined primary and secondary or P-12 school settings, with the majority of these schools holding some religious affiliation. About two thirds of the schools had 1 200 or more students and about a quarter, 600 or fewer. Almost all schools were from city or urban areas.

Females and males were represented about two to one respectively in the sample. Respondents were fairly evenly spread in terms of leadership background, with about a third having 3 years or less experience in leadership positions, a third having 4 to 9 years experience, and the remaining third having more than 9 years experience. The majority (56%) had been in leadership roles in their current schools for 3 years or less, while another third had been in their current school for 4 to 9 years. The remainder had been leaders for more than 9 years.

### **Findings for non-state school leaders - Queensland and New South Wales**

#### Satisfaction in their role as school leader and future career intentions

The vast majority (over 90%) of this group of middle-level school leaders indicated they were satisfied in their role, with almost a third reporting they were *very satisfied*. None of the middle-level leaders indicated they were dissatisfied. Of note, is that the level of satisfaction was related (in a statistically significant way) to:

- how well the notion of team among the school administration team members was developed;
- the time dedicated to strategic leadership and educational/curriculum leadership; and,
- the number of hours worked in a week.

Respondents were asked to indicate their intentions or otherwise regarding promotion. This was considered an indicator, of sorts, as to the depth of the potential promotional pool to the principalship for the future. Notably, only a little over a third of the group indicated that they would seek promotion in the future. Reasons provided by those indicating they would not be seeking promotion, or were not sure, included satisfaction with their current role as a career, the excessive demands of the principalship, lifestyle and work-family balance considerations, and, a preference to remain close to the teaching-learning context – their current role offered them this opportunity. Women overwhelmingly noted lifestyle as the main factor in their decisions about promotion. Only a few indicated they felt there was too much accountability in more senior roles and that this might be a factor mitigating against their seeking promotion.

### Notion of team development

A third of respondents reported their school's management team was highly developed, with 1 in 5 saying the team could be better developed amongst the senior leaders of their school. The remainder (44%) indicated that it was still evolving. Factors identified by respondents as important in developing the notion of team among the school's senior leaders included the attitudes and skills of the principal (with four in five saying these were very important), the attitudes and skills of the senior leaders themselves (almost three-quarters considering them to be very important), past practices and the school culture and the interpersonal relationships among the school senior leaders (four in five considering them very important). Opportunities to engage in relevant and appropriate professional development for promoting teamwork was rated as a major issue here.

### General aspects of roles and responsibilities

In terms of current role and workload, more than a third indicated they were working 60 or more hours a week, with almost a half averaging 50 to 59 hours per week. About two thirds said there had been no change in workload in the past two years, while over a third had noticed an increase.

Just over half rated the pressure in their current role as high, while the remainder regard it as average/medium. Over a half said there had been no change in work pressure in the past two years, while over a third had noticed an increase. Of those indicating increased pressure, several saw this as emanating from the governing body of the school, such as the high expectations being set by the school council. Others noted changing expectations of parents and the need to attend to legislative requirements, such as child protection and occupational health and safety policies.

Almost three quarters of respondents indicated there had been an increase in the variety and diversity of their work in the past two years, while the remainder said there had been no change. Key contributors to the increase in the variety and diversity of their roles were identified by respondents as:

- changes in the school, such as a change of principal and/or management and/or curriculum changes – often these were noted as “new directions” for the school, resulting in significant changes and disruptions;
- a general expansion in the roles and responsibilities of their position; and,
- parental demands/expectations placed on schools.

Asked to comment on the roles of others in their schools, the vast majority reported that principals, heads of department and teachers, as well as those in similar positions to their own, had all experienced increases in their roles in recent years.

### Specific aspects of the role of middle-level school leader

In an endeavour to identify what this group of middle-level school leaders actually did in their role (ie. their *real* role), respondents were asked to indicate the time dedicated in a typical week to a number of key aspects/categories of their role. They were also asked to reflect on, and indicate how they might like to spend their time in an *ideal* or preferred situation relative to the same aspects/categories. These data are summarised in Tables 1 and 2 below.

**TABLE 1: TIME DEDICATED TO VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THE ROLE OF MIDDLE-LEVEL SCHOOL LEADER (*Real*)**

IN A <u>REAL</u> WEEK, TIME DEDICATED TO THESE ACTIVITIES	GREAT DEAL OF TIME (%)	SOME TIME (%)	TOTAL (great + some) (%)
• strategic leadership	15	47	<b>62</b>
• educational/curriculum leadership	27	36	<b>63</b>
• management/administration	53	38	<b>91</b>
• student issues	62	32	<b>94</b>
• parent/community issues	47	29	<b>76</b>
• staffing issues	56	35	<b>91</b>
• operational matters	47	32	<b>79</b>

**TABLE 2: TIME DEDICATED TO VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THE ROLE OF MIDDLE-LEVEL SCHOOL LEADER (*Ideal*)**

IN AN <u>IDEAL</u> WEEK, TIME DEDICATED TO THESE ACTIVITIES	GREAT DEAL OF TIME (%)	SOME TIME (%)	TOTAL (great + some) (%)
• strategic leadership	59	32	<b>91</b>
• educational/curriculum leadership	56	35	<b>91</b>
• management/administration	6	77	<b>83</b>
• student issues	18	62	<b>80</b>
• parent/community issues	9	50	<b>59</b>
• staffing issues	21	50	<b>71</b>
• operational matters	9	24	<b>33</b>

Table 3 provides an useful comparison overall between what might be seen as the *real* and *ideal* roles for these school leaders. Those aspects/categories marked with a \* indicate where they would like to spend more time, those marked by a # indicate where they would like to spend less time. Differences between the *ideal* and *real* of fifteen percent or more are noteworthy.

**TABLE 3: COMPARISON OF *Real* AND *Ideal* ROLES**

ASPECT OF ROLE	<i>Real</i> (%) [great deal + some]	<i>Ideal</i> (%) [great deal + some]	DIFFERENCE TOTAL [ <i>Ideal</i> – <i>Real</i> ]
• strategic leadership	62	91	<b>29*</b>
• educational/curriculum leadership	63	91	<b>28*</b>
• management/administration	91	83	-8#
• student issues	94	80	-14#
• parent/community issues	76	59	-17#
• staffing issues	91	71	-20#
• operational matters	79	33	-46#

\* want more of this; # want less of this; bold = more than 15% difference between *ideal* and *real*

The data in the tables suggest, that at least for this group of respondents, there is a lack of *role alignment* between what these school leaders actually do in a week, and what they would like or prefer to do. Certainly, they reported their *real* week being dominated by operational matters, management and administration and staff, community and student issues. Significantly, strategic leadership and educational/curriculum leadership was less evident in their week. However, those two aspects were, without doubt, the two dominant activities/aspects preferred in their *ideal* week. What is important to note, even though they would prefer a higher profile in strategic and curriculum leadership, is that in their *ideal* week they did not ignore their responsibilities for staff, students, parents and general management matters. What they were clearly less enthusiastic about were operational matters or what many termed lower level tasks. These were captured in the open-ended questions as including dealing with facilities, timetabling, photocopying. One respondent noted: “Largely the day-to-day administration and student needs intervene to destroy the best planned days”.

Respondents were asked to identify those factors they saw as impeding their achieving their *ideal* role. The dominant factors identified were that there were just too many demands on their time to do any more (the major factor), the expectations set by the principal and flow on effect to them as a result of changes in roles and responsibilities of the principal and/or others. One noted that they “needed more assistance with paper work, menial tasks to allow more time with teachers and students”. They believed they had the skills to carry out their preferred leadership roles.

Skills and competencies identified as important to the role of school leader

The non-state school leaders were asked to identify and rate the degree of importance of the key skills and competencies they considered important in undertaking their role. These data are summarised in Table 4.

**TABLE 4: SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES REQUIRED OF MIDDLE-LEVEL SCHOOL LEADERS**

SKILLS, COMPETENCIES IMPORTANT TO ROLE	VERY IMPORTANT (%)	IMPORTANT (%)	‘TOTAL’ (very import + important) (%)
• inspiring, visioning change for school	53	35	<b>88</b>
• demonstrating strong interpersonal, people skills	88	9	<b>97</b>
• capacity to delegate, empower others	56	35	<b>91</b>
• managing uncertainty for self and others	44	50	<b>94</b>
• managing change for self and others	56	41	<b>97</b>
• capacity to develop supportive networks among colleagues	62	35	<b>97</b>
• being an effective and efficient manager and administrator	74	24	<b>98</b>

Clearly, all the skills and competencies identified in the survey items were considered to be important to the roles of these school leaders. Especially noteworthy were “interpersonal skills” and “being an effective and efficient manager” which received the strongest “very important” percentage responses. Other significant skills related to managing uncertainty and change, a

capacity to empower and delegate and capacity to develop supportive networks. In an open-ended item, respondents were asked to identify strengths they felt they brought to their current position. In a long and varied list of responses, those most frequently mentioned are noted below. There are strong overlaps with those noted in the table above.

- strong interpersonal skills
- empathy and understanding of students' needs
- good (strategic) problem solver
- good listener, organiser, manager and planner – in a context of change e.g. one leader noted a need for a “willingness to change and understand change in the community”
- good sense of humour.

These school leaders identified a variety of both leadership and management skills and competencies as being critical to their role, although it could be argued that management aspects were considered more important, probably reflecting the reality (the *real*) of their role. Despite this, it seems apparent that they had to be both a competent manager as well as a leader. Several noted that their roles were really open-ended, comprising a variety of roles and responsibilities, with one noting “the job is never done ... something new is often happening”.

It is not the intention here to look in-depth at any apparent differences across the two sets of State data. However, it is to be noted that overall, the data across the two States were remarkably similar.

## Discussion

This exploratory study suggests that the life of the middle-level school leader is typically a busy one requiring a variety of skills and competencies. While in part they may be considered as co-pilots in flying (leading) the aircraft (school), they also work very much as flight attendants, responding to a myriad of demands from the principal, staff, students and parents. Their world is also characterised by change, with many holding the position having experienced school management, structural and curriculum changes in recent times. Such changes often revolve around the appointment of a new principal and/or school organisational change based around middle schooling notions.

While the profile of the two sets of middle-level school leaders in the 2002 (state secondary deputies) and 2004 (non-state deputies, heads of school, directors of studies and similar) were somewhat different, there are many similarities in the way they described their roles (both *real* and *ideal*), the skills and competencies they believed were important in effectively carrying out those roles and the nature of the “forces” impacting on their roles (A fuller discussion of comparisons between the two data sets is reported elsewhere – Cranston [in prep]). These “forces” impacting included the expectations of parents on schools today (eg. “parents are paying and expect us to do our jobs”), and the need to respond to various legislative requirements. Notably, one difference in these “forces” potentially reflects the different operational contexts of the schooling sectors. For state school leaders, it was the department or the system that was seen as a key change force. For non-state school leaders, similar demands were seen to flow from the governing body of the school, such as the school council.

An important finding of this study, reflecting that of the 2002 study, was the high level of satisfaction of these school leaders in their roles – a third report being very satisfied. Such findings present as real positives for both schools and systems to build on. They are consistent with those reported by Hausman et al (2002) who noted that the vast majority of assistant principals described their work-life in positive ways. Sutter (1996) also reported on the job

satisfaction of secondary school assistant principals, noting that a number of factors contributed to satisfaction, including professional aspirations, an issue of interest in the research reported here.

Importantly, despite their satisfaction in their current roles, these leaders do not identify as a strong pool for potential principals in the future. The data for this study, similar to the findings of Garrett and McGeachie (1999) in the UK, point to a relatively smaller potential aspirational pool than might be desirable or expected. That is, the majority of the logical pool for the next generation of principals has no intention of seeking promotion or are, at least, uncertain about this. In part, this may reflect the comment from the NCSL (2003) that many headteachers found their deputy principal experiences frustrating as they did not have the opportunities for leadership to the extent they had hoped. This is an important matter, because as Ribbins (1997) noted earlier, this situation is not an effective preparation for those seeking promotion to a headship position. Significantly, the women in this study were less likely than men to aspire to promotion, a finding consistent with that of the NCSL (2003). Interestingly, the women in this study who indicated no intention to seek promotion cited a desire to maintain a work-life-family balance as their main reason, seeing the middle-level role more likely to be able to deliver on this goal. Even as middle-level school leaders, such a balance may be difficult to attain as noted by Hausman et al (2002) in their work with assistant principals.

Despite the reported positive job satisfaction of this group of school leaders, many respondents reported working quite long hours (typically 50 plus hours a week) and under considerable pressure (half rated the pressure in their role as high). This is consistent with the findings reported by Hausman et al (2002) where assistant principals were working an average of 55 hours per week. The increase in pressure on middle-level school leaders as identified here has been noted earlier by Campbell and Neill (1994) who described both internal and external school pressures increasing. Kaplan and Owings (1999) also noted increased stressors on assistant principals, including different and wider responsibilities, increased planning, organising and coordinating, more problem solving and more interaction with adults, such as parents and staff. They effectively needed more time to do the job, reflecting Porter's (1996) observation of "overwhelming time constraints" on assistant principals (p. 25).

The expanding workload on these school leaders, reflected in the increase in the variety and diversity of responsibilities in the role (three-quarters reported an increase), has been acknowledged by the NCSL (2003) who noted as the workload has increased for heads (principals), so has it increased for deputy heads as a result of delegation of responsibilities.

One of the more important findings of this study, and reflecting the earlier 2002 data, is that middle-level school leaders desire a greater leadership role in their schools, strategic and curriculum/educational leadership. As it stands, this group's current roles have less to do with leadership than with management, although like Harvey (1995) found, the group acknowledges that there are expectations around the roles of deputy principals regarding administrative routines and staff management. The discrepancy between the *ideal* (preferred) and *real* (actual) roles have been described here as a lack of *role alignment*. Operational matters and dealing with staff and students are significant consumers of the time of these leaders. This finding is consistent with that of Hausman et al (2002) who noted that assistant principals reported spending considerable time working on student and staff issues, raising concerns about the minimal time they spent on other matters, such as instructional leadership. Garrett and McGeachie (1999) noted a similar situation, with deputies in their study thinking of their role mainly in operational terms, with few being able to develop more strategic perspectives. From career and employer perspectives, where there is lack of *role alignment* and days are

characterised by high pressure, then role conflict and role overload may occur (Marshall, 1992), a less than desirable situation.

Finally, it worth highlighting the important, albeit not surprising finding of this (and the earlier 2002 study) that interpersonal/people skills are critical to carrying out the role of a middle-level school leader. Morrison (1997) saw this as the “need to attend to people, personalities, interactions – the human dimension” of such roles (p. 68). This need for good interpersonal skills was also noted by Johnson (2000) who saw that between 80 and 90 percent of assistant principals’ time was spent communicating. This reflects the essential people-nature of both the leadership and management aspects of the roles of these school leaders.

## Conclusions

The findings of this exploratory study into the roles of middle-level school leaders make a contribution to the void of research into these critical, yet under-researched positions in schools. There are clearly areas emerging from the study that require a more in-depth research treatment if we are to more comprehensively understand both the dynamics of the role in action and its potential to contribute to the leadership of schools in these challenging times. While these school leaders, and those in similar positions investigated in the earlier study (Cranston et al, 2002), are clearly very busy people who work long hours and under considerable pressure in roles that have changed and are changing, there are indications that they may well be an under-utilised resource, particularly from a leadership perspective, for the school. How schools might utilise this resource, while at the same time managing the roles they currently carry out presents as a real challenge if such positions as deputy principal, heads of schools, directors of studies and so on are to move beyond mainly managerial responsibilities. It is more than a decade since Harvey (1994) argued for a reconceptualisation of the role of deputy principal to one embracing both leadership and management. It would seem that progress in this regard has been slow.

Future research into the roles of mid-level school leaders might well be advanced across other states to determine if the trends suggested in Queensland and New South Wales as reported here are indeed typical of this group of school leaders. What is also worthy of further investigation are the barriers preventing such leaders moving their role to one more leadership oriented, while at the same time ensuring the essential administrative demands are attended to. Is the need, as it appears here, one of assisting them in more systematic ways to avoid being swamped by operational matters? Is it indeed a challenge of moving them to a genuine co-pilot position with the principal and away from that of flight steward, responding to the often ad hoc and time consuming demands of the “passengers”?

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