School leaders for the future: The use of cases in the leadership development of principals

Associate Professor Neil Cranston
School of Education
The University of Queensland
Brisbane, Q, 4072.
Email: n.cranston@uq.edu.au

Abstract

There is little doubt that school leaders face challenges as never before. Indeed, successful principals now are required to demonstrate leadership capabilities spanning educational, personal, relational, intellectual and organisational dimensions. Most education systems in recent years have acknowledged the increasingly complex roles and responsibilities for principals, re-developing their leadership statements and frameworks for principals away from the dominant managerialist orientations of the nineties to those more reflective of the capabilities identified above. Having laid out what principals ought to be capable of doing and how they ought to act, the real challenges then arise as to how these capabilities might be developed in principals and those aspiring to such positions.

Education Queensland, the state school system comprising some 1300 schools, recently developed a new statement about the principalship, Leadership Matters. To support this, the system has embarked on a range of leadership development strategies for its principals and aspirants. One of these strategies is the development of a set of cases, drawing on problem-based learning principles (Bridges & Hallinger, 1995). This paper documents the development of the cases and reports some early feedback from users of the cases as to their relevance and efficacy as leadership development “tools” for principals.
Introduction and background

Like most education systems nationally and internationally and in response to the changing and challenging demands on schools today, the state department of education in Queensland, Australia (Education Queensland) recently reviewed its statement about the expectations on, and characteristics of, their principals. This body has responsibility for some 1 300 schools in the state. Such statements have typically been couched as frameworks and more often than not based around extensive sets of leadership competencies with managerialist undertones. For example, the previous statement in Queensland was titled Standards Framework for Leaders (Education Queensland, 1997) and was a competency driven model comprising almost 60 pages. The review of this Framework, together with subsequent developmental work, led to the current statement about the principalship, Leadership Matters: Leadership capabilities for Education Queensland principals (Queensland Government, Department of Education, Training & the Arts, n.d.) a concise articulation of leadership framed around five capabilities: educational, personal, relational, intellectual and organisational.

As one strategy to foster understanding of Leadership Matters, and as part of a broader thrust of leadership development of principals and aspirants, Education Queensland commissioned a project to develop a set of case studies1 based around problem-based learning notions. It was envisaged that they would be used in a series of developmental workshops for principals across the state. It is these cases and their development that provide the focus for this paper.

Case and case method as professional development tools have been embedded in legal, health and management development for many years, with Harvard University law and business schools having used them for a century or so (Clamp, n.d.). Problem-based learning, the nomenclature used in some writings (see discussion of terminology later) originated in medical education, spreading to architecture, law, nursing and engineering (Boud & Feletti, 1997). In education, Orr (2006) has identified case and problem-based teaching methods as now primary modes of teaching in many leadership development programs “because they offer situated learning and the means to try out multiple perspectives” (p. 495). In short, the approach provides professional development opportunities that are “dynamic and grounded in ‘real-life’ experiences involving some of the myriad of highly complex challenges faced by school leaders” (Cranston, 2002, p. 4).

Leadership development and principals

There is little doubt that being a principal today offers multiple challenges (Bottery, 2004; Cranston, 2003). Equally challenging, is not only how best to prepare aspirants for the principalship, but also how to continue the leadership development of those already in principal positions. Not surprisingly, much has been written about how these challenges might be addressed (Barnett, 2004; Bush & Glover, 2005; Coles & Southworth, 2005; Fauske, 2002; Weindling, 2003). As Griffith and Taraban (2002) have noted, “The need to develop new models for the preparation of school

---

1 A discussion of terminology is provided later in the paper – in brief, for current purposes, cases are used in a problem-based learning context – they provide the focus for discussion, analysis, knowledge generation
administrators has been a prominent concern in educational discourse”. Indeed, such is the interest in this area that broadly focused education journals such as *Phi Delta Kappan* are devoting more and more attention to it (see for example, Volume 87, Number 7, 2006).

Danzig (1999) frames a response to the question as to how might leadership be taught by highlighting that “Leadership is not understood by breaking it down into a set of component parts. Leadership is learning to analyse prior experiences in order better to understand how they shape future courses of action” (p. 130). As one response to the challenge of providing contemporary leadership development experiences for principals, Griffith and Taraban (2002) have developed on-line case narratives for developing school leaders, arguing that such an approach through cases can address the complexities of school leadership, including “the social, cultural, relational, ethical and moral context of school leadership”. This focus on the use of cases and PBL fits well with the arguments of Walker and Dimmock (2005) that we need to see leadership development in context. That is, leadership development needs to include “meaningful involvement of principals in their own and their peers’ learning” (p. 80). This notion is also consistent with the arguments of Halverson et al (2004) that we need to help “school leaders develop the ability to apply knowledge appropriately in their work (requiring) access to rich examples of contextualized practical wisdom to guide their practice” (p. 3).

**What can cases and PBL contribute to leadership development?**

As noted, the use of cases, and problem-based learning has been used in education for some time, notably with an emphasis on leadership development for principals and aspiring principals. Bridges and Hallinger (1995) made a significant contribution to this area with the publication of their book, *Implementing problem based learning in leadership development* over 10 years ago, seen at the time as bringing a new instructional approach to school administration (the latter term very much one of the 90s). Their ideas subsequently underpinned a variety of leadership development programs in a number of places. For example, in Australia, Queensland (see Cranston, 2002; Crowther & Limerick, 1998) and more recently New South Wales (New South Wales Department of Education & Training, n.d.) have had initiatives in this regard. Such is the interest in the use of cases now in some educational jurisdictions that a whole journal is now dedicated to the area (refer *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* – [www.ucea.org/cases](http://www.ucea.org/cases)).

It should be noted that there are some definitional issues debated about the use of terminology such as cases, case method and problem-based learning (PBL). As noted above, some writers use the terms almost interchangeably. For example, Fauske (2000) has noted that “in a single conversation, it may alternatively be called case method, problem-based learning, case based instruction, or teaching from cases” (p. 1). Bridges and Hallinger (1999) see problem-based learning (PBL) as representing “another instructional modality that relies heavily on cases” (p. 1). PBL, Hallinger and Snidvongs (2005) argue, “requires learners to understand and apply research, theory and craft knowledge to major problems faced by practitioners” (p. 9).

Clamp (n.d.) provides a simple definition of a case as “an account or description of a situation or sequence of events confronting an individual, a group of individuals, or an
organization.” Richert (1991) has suggested that case methodology combines both artifactual and social elements. The artifactual component is the case itself (a description of a leadership challenge), while the discussion about the case among colleagues forms the social component. Clamp sees “case method as an instructional technique that presents situations to analyse and information from which decisions must be made, rather than delivering to the students concepts and theories. Learning in case studies takes place by doing by analysing data both quantitatively and qualitatively; by making decisions as to appropriate recommendations and actions; by communicating such decisions and discussing their rationale” with colleagues. Halverson et al (2004) see cases as opportunities to illustrate both “exemplary practices as well as to problematize situations for pedagogical purposes” (p. 3).

In short, cases are the “core” or focus of a problem-based learning approach. While it is not the intention here to engage in a discussion of the differences in meaning across the various terminologies, it is to be noted that Fauske (2000) does provide a useful analysis of some of the issues and terms. What is relevant here is that the focus is not on problems as such, but on the many nuances that surround, impact on and complexify the problem – that is, it is about more than just a problem but a case, for as Fauske (2000) points out, and this is relevant to the project under discussion here, cases are longer, thicker stories, they are less structured and messy, divergent responses are encouraged and the learner (here, the principal) is seen as an expert in the content relevant to a particular case. Hence, for the purposes of this discussion, cases are being used in a problem-based learning context – they provide the focus for discussion, analysis, knowledge generation leading to principal leadership development.

Of course, such approaches drawing on “real-life” examples alone are not sufficient for the leadership development of principals, but they are effective where decision-making skills are crucial as such cases offer opportunities to practice analysis, problem solving, action, planning and evaluation (Merseth, 1997). Importantly, Bridges and Hallinger (1999) point out that PBL can also facilitate the acquisition of insights into the emotional aspects of leadership, noting that leadership “involves more that cognitive activities such as solving problems and making decisions; it can sometimes be an emotional ordeal” (p. 2). Hallinger and Snidvongs (2005) re-enforce the important, albeit still limited contribution of cases in the learning of principals by warning that PBL is but one of a mosaic of possibilities and is not “the silver bullet that will enhance the professional development of school leaders. However, it does represent one useful tool for professional development” (p. 9).

Importantly, it is argued that what cases can uniquely contribute to the leadership development of principals is in bridging the theory-practice divide, providing an effective response to the criticism of many leadership development programs, such as those often offered through universities, as being too theoretical and not related to the real world faced by principals (Muse & Thomas, 1991). In response to this criticism, Danzig (1997, p. 125) has argued for the use of cases that emphasise “the value of both theory and practice, experience and reflection”. He has also (1999) argued that the stories used in case method “are a way to represent experience … and these stories can be subject to scrutiny and reflection. (They) connect the explicit, formal symbolic presentations of knowledge and practical know-how found in action” (p. 118). Richert
(1991, p. 140) see the use of cases as a “dialectic between events and meanings, practice and theory”.

Griffith and Taraban (2002) argue for their use because they link professional experiences, providing the “cognitive basis for generalizing from local experience to the more general perspective required of school principals”. It is important to note that because case methods (or problem-based learning) almost invariably are conducted with groups or cohorts of participants, the potential advantages of working in this way are promoted (Scriber & Donaldson, 2001). Used appropriately, they avoid “group-think”. In fact, working together in these sorts of ways has the potential to facilitate the development of learning communities (Morrissey, 2000).

Finally, Claudet (1998) has argued that “case method application in the area of school leadership has proven a valuable tool for the professional training and continuing development of educational leaders” (p. 1). In short, the use of case method and problem-based learning are now well accepted, and indeed well regarded, as one effective strategy for the leadership development of school leaders.

Some underpinnings of cases and PBL

In considering the appropriateness and potential power of cases and problem-based learning for leadership development in the rapidly discontinuously changing environment in which schools now operate (Limerick, et al, 2002), it is instructive to reflect on the arguments of Taylor et al (2002), who see a need to reverse what they consider to have been six traditional priorities in leadership education:

- from theory to practice;
- from parts to systems;
- from states and roles to processes;
- from knowledge to learning;
- from individual action to partnerships;
- from detached analysis to reflexive understanding (p. 353).

Each of these shifts resonates well with the principles underpinning PBL and case method. Indeed, these are the very characteristics that make cases such powerful tools in leadership development. Bridges and Hallinger (1992) highlight this and have identified a number of principles that they believe need to frame PBL. These include:

- the starting point for learning is a problem – this is usually presented as a case;
- the problem is one that participants are likely to face in their futures;
- the knowledge that participants need to acquire is organised around problems rather than disciplines;
- participants, individually and collectively, assume a major responsibility for their own instruction and learning – the process is facilitated;
- the learning occurs within the context of small groups; and,
- the participants are provided with resource materials.

Not surprisingly, these principles for PBL are framed by some important theories of learning, adult learning in particular (see for example Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), that focus on the notion of the constructivist leader (Lambert et al, 2002). Aspects of relevance to be highlighted here include that:

- learning is an active rather than a passive process;
- learning is by nature social and is most likely to occur when learners share ideas, enquire, and problem solve together;
- learners must have opportunities to make sense of new knowledge and create meaning for themselves based on individual and shared experiences;
- reflection and meta-cognition contribute to the construction of knowledge and the process of sense-making; and,
- new learning is mediated by prior experience, values and beliefs.

(Szabo & Lambert, 2002)

Key notions highlighted here then are that leadership development activities built on PBL principles are that they are undertaken as group activities, that they focus on engaging participants actively in “real world” cases and that the learning of participants and the generation of new knowledge is achieved through the shared collective understandings and insights among participants. As such, action learning provides some key foundations to the case method and problem-based learning approaches, which McGill and Beaty (2001) see as an “experiential learning cycle”:

> Action learning is a continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues, with an intention of getting things done. Through action learning, individuals learn with and from each other by working on real problems and reflecting on their own experiences (p. 21)

The underpinnings of cases and PBL identified here provide valuable sets of guidelines and characteristics that need to be kept in mind when preparing cases and accompanying developmental processes. Indeed, they provided useful benchmarks against which the cases discussed in this paper were reflected to ensure they represented “best practice”. The guidelines provided by ANZSOG (n.d.) and Arcadia University (2006) were also useful in this regard. Before looking at the particular cases of interest here, it is instructive to note briefly some of the challenges likely to arise in the use of cases with principals.

**Challenges for principals in using cases**

Some writers have noted that often those engaged in working through cases can miss the complexities. Griffith and Taraban (2002) see this as arising from a desire to seek the “right” answers, rather than “exploring the case complexities”. It might be argued that this in part exemplifies the life of many principals, who are often required to provide rapid responses to a seemingly endless array of issues – from parents, teachers, students, systems – many of which are far from rational and straightforward. By missing the complexities, responses may address the surface problems rather than underlying problems (MacNeil, cited in Griffith & Taraban). As Richert (1991) has argued, working with cases requires participants to learn to manage, deal with and problem solve multiple complexities, diversities and perspectives. There is no one right answer! Nor is there likely to be only one way of dealing with the challenges presented in a particular case. Indeed, it is facilitating principals to look for, and appreciate the deeper complexities in cases, and developing coherent and reasoned responses to these complexities where real learning can occur (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). Mohr (1998) has developed a set of protocols or factors for success in working with principal groups, one key element of which is to get them to deepen their understandings by being more descriptive and less judgemental. In brief, what is
needed is for principals to work in small groups, to encourage them “take on the life” of the principal at the centre of the case, to try to get them to understand the deeper complexities of the context and the key players and stakeholders and to take a longer (rather than shorter) term view to problem-solving. They also need to be encouraged to engage with the “emotions” likely to be evident in case. Finally, sufficient time and opportunity for discussion are two critical ingredients, good facilitation is another in order to maximise the potential leadership learnings from this approach.

Developing the cases and accompanying materials

This section provides an overview of the development of the leadership cases of interest in this paper.

The Queensland education department (Education Queensland) commissioned two external consultants to develop the cases to foster understanding of Leadership Matters, and as part of a broader thrust of leadership development of principals and aspirants. One of the consultants had extensive experience in developing various school materials and had previously held a senior leadership role in a national curriculum body. The other, an academic (the author), worked in the educational leadership area (e.g. as coordinator of a Masters program in leadership) and had extensive experience working with principals through an earlier role he held. He also had experience in developing problem-based learning materials for leadership development of principals and aspirants.

The two consultants prepared a brief for the project, including templates as to what might be expected in the nature, focus and content of suitable cases. This was critiqued by departmental officers, with the final format used essentially as the “agenda” for a one-day writing workshop subsequently held with a group of experienced and respected principals and some other senior departmental officers (e.g. one Regional Executive Director, one Executive Director (Schools) – each had previously been a principal). The workshop began with a detailed brief to participants about the nature and purpose of the case development task and followed with writing sessions (participants had access to laptops, printers), reflection/sharing sessions and a final debrief. The key purpose in engaging principals directly in the development of the cases via this workshop was to ensure each case reflected “real life” challenges and experiences of principals. In so doing, it was expected that when taken to a broader audience of principals across the state, the cases would have high credibility with users because of their origins and authenticity. Some case developers (see for example Danzig, 1999) have used interviews with principals to solicit the leadership stories from school leaders, with the actual cases developed around such ideas after the interviews.

Participants in the case development workshop were provided with some pre-readings to ensure they were well prepared for the actual writing task – a template (refer Appendix) for them to think about (and start to draft ideas) was included with these materials. They were encouraged to have a clear case in mind for development at the workshop and to bring any materials they thought might provide useful background/context for this. In the main, principals found it difficult to generate anywhere near a “final product” by the end of the workshop – they struggled to write in the required genre. One of the apparent problems was a difficulty in actually
writing about what they had done – they were able to describe an incident or a process, but were unable to draw out theirs (and others) leadership aspects in any detailed and critical way. Individual discussions with the consultants during the workshop assisted some principals to achieve this. The workshop resulted in the “shells” for some 10 cases, each requiring considerable post-workshop re-drafting to develop them into usable material. Some of these were eventually discarded and not developed further. The consultants then generated sets of questions relevant to each case, finally achieving 7 cases that were considered suitable for including in a suit of leadership development materials. Each received critical feedback from departmental officers, then reviewed and revised before finalisation. Broad focus “topics” of the cases included:

- a whole school reform process;
- curriculum reform – in one case at a particular year level, another involved a whole-school literacy change;
- human resource management – selection and subsequent removal of a poor performing deputy principal; and,
- administration of a special medicine to a disabled student.

Each case was then linked to some specific readings/literature that were relevant to the particular issues raised in the case. This was done to provide workshop participants with some tangible follow-up readings, endeavouring to encourage them to further pursue their leadership learnings highlighted in the case activities. Links were also provided to relevant aspects of *Leadership Matters* as this was one of the prime reasons for developing the cases, viz. developing deeper insights into the capabilities in *Leadership Matters* as well as identifying aspects of their own leadership requiring further development. This particular link tended to be quite general as it was felt somewhat artificial to try to highlight particular leadership aspects when in reality multiple and interdependent aspects were evident in each case.

In brief, each case is about 5 pages long and comprises:

- **summary** – an overview of the case to provide an introduction of the focus and nature of the ‘problem’ and some of the key issues for the reader;
- **background** – important contextual and other background setting the scene for consideration of the case;
- **set of initial questions** – a generic set of questions to get participants to read the case carefully and critically, encouraging them to make notes about important factual data provided in the cases and so on;
- **the story** – a detailed (approximately 2 pages) reporting of the story – details of key players and events are provided;
- **main questions** – specific questions targeted at the case;
- **outcome** – the next step in the case – here some details are provided for participants, but some “unfinished” business is also raised for consideration;
- **questions for the workshop** – specific questions about the case to drive and focus small group discussion – in some instances, participants are required to draft materials e.g. items for a school community meeting;
- **links to Leadership Matters** – the aim here is to highlight specific leadership capabilities – in particular, where each participant may identify aspect(s) for further personal/professional development; and,
- **links to some relevant literature** – for participants to follow up some readings of particular relevance to the particular issues raised in the case.
As well as the cases materials, detailed companion materials – facilitators guide, participants guide and so on – were also developed. This resulted in the compilation of a comprehensive stand-alone volume of leadership development materials for use across the state with principals and aspirants – under appropriate facilitation.

This final volume of materials is soon to be trialled via a workshop of a group (maximum of 15) of Executive Directors (Schools) [the supervisors of principals] and Executive Principals (the most senior principals in the system). The volume contains 7 stand-alone cases – 3 related to secondary schools, 3 related to primary schools and 1 related to a special school contexts. The purposes of this workshop are two fold. The first is to allow participants to become very familiar with the materials, working through them first hand and developing their skills to facilitate future workshops with subsequent groups of principals. There will also be the opportunity to receive feedback about the specific cases and accompanying materials for input to any further development. In this latter regard, participants will be invited to contribute critical feedback on the efficacy and effectiveness generally of the cases in the leadership development of principals and aspiring principals, and more specifically on the “quality” (relevance, authenticity and so on) of individual cases. This is detailed a little further below.

**Accompanying research and evaluation**

The first phase of implementation of use of the cases is being paralleled with a small scale research-evaluation study that seeks feedback from workshop participants on various aspects of the case method itself as an effective and useable leadership development strategy for principals and aspirants. In addition, data is sought on particular cases, as to how they might be further refined and developed to enhance their efficacy as professional development tools.

Workshop participants will be invited to complete a short questionnaire on the two areas noted above. A hard copy will be distributed at the workshop – with an electronic version emailed to participants immediately following the workshop. The questionnaire will comprise mainly closed items in an effort to maximise return rates, answered on Likert-type scales – it is considered the simpler and easier the questionnaire is to complete, the higher the likely response from the first-up workshop participants. A number of open ended items are also to be included, mainly as optional items – these are intended to solicit more detailed responses to particular issues raised in the closed items. It is expected that the questionnaire will take no more than 10 to 15 minutes to complete and return. Respondents will be able to complete and return their questionnaire either in electronic format or in hardcopy.

**Future directions**

While the current intention is to use the cases developed thus far with groups of school principals from different schools across districts across the state (there are almost 1300 state schools in Queensland), one powerful leadership development

---

2 Results of this research-evaluation study will be available mid-year and will be discussed during the paper presentation.
opportunity for the future centres around individual school leadership teams working collectively and collegially on cases. That is, leadership learning synergies potentially available for an individual school will be derived if whole school leadership teams are provided with the opportunity to work together on the cases. All the advantages of action learning and so on referred to earlier are likely to be enhanced in this way.

Concluding comments

There is no doubt that education systems across the world are employing various strategies to enhance the leadership capacities of their principals (and aspirants) as schools are subjected to increasingly complex demands. The use of cases (and PBL) has been one such strategy attracting increasing interest and has been effective in this regard, particularly in making the theory-practice links for principals and in facilitating cooperative and collaborative learning among principals. This paper has documented one attempt by one large Australian education system to augment their other leadership development strategies with a set of cases. Importantly, the cases have been developed the ideas of principals for use with/by principals. The project is at a critical time as the completed materials are now taken forward for use with a body of senior officers who will take a lead role in facilitating the use of the cases among groups of principals across the state. The story of the case development and the next phase in their use hopefully can contribute to the challenges of developing “competent and responsible leaders for tomorrow’s schools (Griffith & Taraban, 2002).
References


Australian and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) (n.d.). *Discovering the leader within: An approach to case analysis*. Course materials.


### Appendix

**DRAFTING TEMPLATE FOR CASE DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION</th>
<th>WHAT SHOULD THE SECTION INCLUDE?</th>
<th>INDICATIVE LENGTH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The issue</td>
<td>Describe briefly the issue which you plan to write about.</td>
<td>One paragraph (about 100 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why it matters</td>
<td>Describe briefly why this issue was important to the school</td>
<td>One paragraph (about 100 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The series of events</td>
<td>Tell the story of what happened. Include as much detail as you can. Please make sure that all the key events are described. This section should be the most substantial and detailed. It should be clear about what your role, and that of critical others, was in intervening to achieve an outcome. It should also include anecdotes or incidents which might enliven the case study for a reader.</td>
<td>Two pages (about 800-1200 words)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| The outcome | Briefly describe the outcome of the series of events, focusing on results:  
- What changed as a result of the series of events?  
- How was this similar to or different from what was expected to occur? | Two paragraphs (about 180 words) |
| Causes | Briefly indicate what you see as the reasons for the successes and failures of the initiative. | Two paragraphs (about 180 words) |
| Reflection | What did you learn about your own leadership from this experience? What did you do well? What would you do differently next time? What leadership learnings, if any, are there for critical others involved in the case. | Two paragraphs (about 180 words) |
| How it links with Leadership Matters | Describe how the issue links with the *Leadership Matters* framework | Two paragraphs (about 180 words) |
| The people | Provide brief character sketches of yourself, and up to four of the other main players in the series of events (a paragraph on each is enough). It would be helpful if the character sketches helped explain why people acted as they did | One paragraph per character (about 100 words per character) |
| Setting | Describe the school and the area in which the events took place. Include relevant details such as: | Two paragraphs (about 180 words) |
| | - Size and characteristics of the student population  
- Characteristics of the school  
- State of the buildings  
- Characteristics of the area  
- Demographic changes in the area  
- School culture  
- Recent changes (eg. in key staff), main events etc that may have impacted on the case | |
| Staff | Describe the staff of the school (numbers, any significant leaders or characters, atmosphere and morale) | Two paragraphs (about 180 words) |
| Antecedents | List any relevant previous events or issues which | Two paragraphs |
impacted on the chain of events you are going to describe (eg a previous principal tried to change the curriculum and met resistance; the school was seen as at risk of closure; a major building program had recently been completed).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Documents</th>
<th>Please provide any documents which would be useful to us in understanding what happened and why.</th>
<th>Digital copies if possible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(about 180 words)