



AUSTRALIAN PRINCIPALS CENTRE

Monograph Number 3

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PREPARING TO FACE THE CHALLENGES OF PRINCIPALSHIP: THE “PRISM” MODEL

by Bruce Barnett

THE CHALLENGES OF PRINCIPALSHIP

Practising Principals in Australia and across the world have become captive to a workload of unrelenting demand and pace (Combs, Miser & Whitaker, 1999). In addition, Peterson (1985) reminded us long ago of the persistent dilemma facing Principals: that their work and interactions are characterised by brevity, fragmentation and variety — leaving little time to make thoughtful, well-informed decisions.

Business leaders similarly have been swept up in the frantic pace of decision making, forcing them constantly to react, rather than thoughtfully to consider alternative courses of action (Dandelin, 1996).

Indeed, the defining image of the organisational leader in the 21st century is very much ‘action oriented’. Leaders who pause to examine the rationale for, or consequences of, their actions, frequently are viewed as being indecisive, or as lacking the confidence to make important decisions. The phrase ‘The leader who hesitates is lost’, appears to be more meaningful today than ever before.

Our previous experience with Principals suggests they are faced with at least two major challenges:

Two of the Major Challenges currently facing Principals

- 1 **Isolation** prevents Principals from being exposed to new ideas.
- 2 The relentless pace of their jobs **inhibits** the ability of Principals to use **reflective practice** to assist them in becoming more expert problem solvers.

Isolation

How often do Principals have the chance to observe their peers in action, or to talk to their peers about how they operate; how they deal with those day-to-day problems that dominate their working lives? Only occasionally, if at all. However, when Principals do have the chance to observe one another, they consistently discover and reveal practices or tips that they are picking up from working with their partners.

‘Shadowing’ programs provide opportunities to break down some of the isolation that Principals suffer, and broaden their perspectives on how they do their jobs. In an article that I wrote as long ago as 1987, I gave examples from interviews with Principals who had been involved in shadowing other school leaders as partners, observing peer practice and sharing their learning.

Some spoke of major changes that had come about as a result of this experience — perhaps gaining a whole new insight into how to go about visiting their teachers’ classrooms. Others described more minor adjustments that they would be making to their practice as a result of what they had seen, for example changing their style of interaction with staff to be more directive, having observed the advantages of that for another Principal in a ‘real life’ situation.

Being given the opportunity to shadow and interview one another helps Principals to learn new ways to handle common situations and problems. It also helps them to develop their observational and interviewing skills — as well as their capacity for reflection.

Given that Principals are constantly observing their teachers practice, and are involved many times a day in interviews with members of the wider school community, these are valuable skills to develop.

A good shadowing program requires the participant to produce records of the shadowing, which can provide a stimulus for reflection over time. It encourages participants not only to

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Bruce Barnett — *Preparing to Face the Challenges of Principals: The PRISM Model*

observe each other's actions, but also to probe their peer partners for deeper levels of information. Active listening is a skill that participants can develop through this process, as is their ability to use anecdotes as the basis for changes in practice.

Principals who take part in peer observation processes remark that their sense of isolation is reduced. Through their involvement in the process, at the most basic level, they come to realise that they are not acting or feeling differently from their peers — whose styles of operation had previously been invisible to them.

In interviews during our research in this area Principals have often remarked on how this makes them feel affirmed or validated in how they fulfil their Principal role.

One of the things I've really enjoyed is having a chance to go ... watch somebody do what I do and stand aside not having to ... know what happened before or what's going to happen later. But just to look at that specific segment and say, "You know, that's really what I do too."

An additional benefit mentioned by many Principals is that shadowing programs allow them to become part of a collegial support system. Often informal networks of participants develop a life of their own beyond the time limits of the program.

Having shared the experience of the program, the participants tend to develop close professional relationships based on the crucial element of personal trust and respect. This is a significant outcome from their sharing of interpretations, insights and ideas.

Back in their working environments they feel that they can go back to their program partners and find ongoing support and guidance. Many say that they intend continuing with the practice of shadowing and reflective interviewing and that they will involve other school leaders and administrators in their practice.

Reflection and Expertise

Given the fact that Principals generally have very little opportunity to interact with others, they find difficulty in being aware of how they can come to practise expert leadership, and expert problem solving as part of that role. In my 1995 article (*Developing Reflection and Expertise: Can Mentors Make the Difference*), I explored the different ways in which experts and novices handle problems.

Sparks-Langer et al had written about this earlier. They commented that:

When confronted with a problem situation or decision making, experts can draw on (a) rich source of previously learned patterns and information and thus can make more appropriate decisions. Novices, in contrast, can produce fewer interpretations and possible alternatives in a given situation.

Sparks-Langer et al, 1990, p 25.

Research by Leithwood and Stager (1989) found that expert problem solvers use more basic principles in framing problems, and are better at recognising problems, than are typical Principals. Leithwood and Steinbach (1992) drew on this research in developing a model that outlines six major areas in which the problem solving processes differ between experts and typical Principals.

The six areas are:

- 1 problem interpretation;
- 2 goals for problem solving;
- 3 underlying principles and values;
- 4 constraints;
- 5 solution processes;
- 6 effect.



A good shadowing program requires the participant to produce records of the shadowing, which can provide a stimulus for reflection over time. It encourages participants not only to observe each other's actions, but also to probe their peer partners for deeper levels of information.

In general terms, Leithwood and Steinbach indicated that as compared with expert Principals, typical Principals tend to:

- take into account far fewer variables when making decisions;
- see constraints as insurmountable barriers to reaching goals;
- give less attention to planning;
- be more fearful of the consequences of their actions.

The Value and Development of Reflection

Reflection has great value for assisting Principals (and others) to become autonomous, expert thinkers and problem solvers. A host of conceptual models and theoretical frameworks has been developed both to describe the reflective process and to reinforce the importance of educational practitioners becoming more reflective about their practice.

Drawing on this large body of work, Ross (1989) outlined five basic components in which individuals engage during the reflection process. These are to:

- 1 identify the problem/issue to be resolved;
- 2 respond to the problem/issue by determining similarities to other situations and unique features of the situation;
- 3 frame and reframe the problem/issue;
- 4 anticipate possible consequences and implications for various solutions to the problem/issue; and
- 5 determine whether the anticipated consequences are desired.

Conceptualised in this way, reflection is viewed as an information-processing strategy. Conducted in a thoughtful way, it will provide opportunities for practitioners to expand their knowledge base and improve their actions — developing the more complex interconnections and depth of thinking characteristic of expert thinkers.

Implications for Professional Development

So, what are the implications for those of us involved in professional development and leadership training? If reflection is a key to facilitating higher order/expert thinking and problem solving, is there evidence that training programs can help individuals develop their capacity for reflection? Can we design programs to promote the development of reflection as a cognitive skill for our Principals?

There is emerging evidence that certain instructional conditions can positively influence educators' reflective and problem solving abilities. Positive experiences have been reported, for example, from research (Leithwood and Steinbach, 1992), when working with teachers and students in the following ways:

- using the critical incident process to stimulate group discussions among educational administrators
- keeping reflective journals;
- using case study methods with students rather than traditional teaching methods
- linking course content to field experiences with pre-service teacher education students; and
- using problem based instruction with practising Principals and Vice Principals.

In summary, research findings suggest strongly that if instructional strategies are designed intentionally to stimulate reflection, then prospective and practising educators do become more proficient in their ability to reflect and to solve problems. They support the notion that reflection is a catalyst for developing expert thinking.

Recognising these conclusions, APC has supported the development of the PRISM™ learning program, to help Principals develop their reflective and problem solving skills. It is a program developed in Australia to meet the needs of Australian Principals. The second part of this paper describes the program and discusses its objectives, as well as some of the perceived outcomes from its initial presentation.



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THE PRISM LEARNING PROGRAM

The unique peer-observation and feedback program developed at the Far West Laboratory in San Francisco, referred to as Peer Assisted Leadership (PAL), established a novel way to facilitate school leaders' professional growth. PAL participants reported that forming peer partnerships helped them to reflect on their school's operations, their own leadership, and how one affects the other.

Having been one of the originators of the PAL program, I have recently collaborated with Australian Principals Centre in the development of the PRISM learning program, which is designed to refine the PAL principles and apply them as a new millennium course in an Australian context.

The expressed intent of APC's PRISM™ is to help Principals grapple with the challenges of leading their schools in an era of rapid change, heightened expectations and increased accountability. The program is framed in terms of a non-judgemental, inquiry based approach to leadership development.

Participants come to the program in pairs, selecting their working partners from within their own area. It is important that participation should be voluntary, and that it should be their choice of partners, rather than being mandated. (When we first ran this in Victoria, the Principals came from the Gippsland Region. In addition there were participants from the NSW Education Department, who were there in their capacity as trainers, looking at how they might use the program in training other Principals.)

The participants work closely with their chosen partners over a period of four to six months. During that time they shadow one another as they lead their schools, interview each other about what has been observed, and analyse their leadership activities.

A major assumption is that as trust builds between partners it results in a fertile ground for candid exchanges of ideas about practice, deep reflection on issues dealing with strategic leadership, and self analysis. Partners' learnings about leadership are guided using conceptual frameworks of leadership and schools as systemic organisations.

Participants work regularly with their partner, meet as a cohort and learn and practise various skills — including shadowing and reflective interviewing — in order to share and process their partnership experiences.

Aims

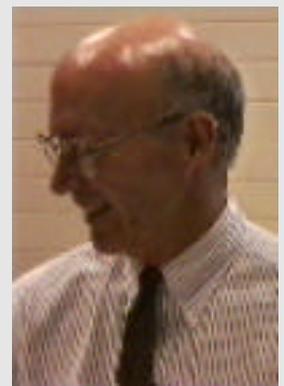
The stated aims of the program are to promote peer and cohort learning, provide a supportive forum for developing professional dialogue to help reduce isolation, deepen understanding, and support school wide change.

The name of the course — PRISM — reflects, as an acronym, the guiding principles of the program:

- P Peers learning from one another
- R Reflecting about values and practices
- I Inquiring about leadership
- S Sharing ideas, aspirations and practices
- M Mastering the challenge of becoming a strategic school leader.

Feedback from participants has been very good. Principals taking part in PRISM have reported that they believe it has provided them with a unique learning opportunity. In particular, they claim that their participation in the program has:

- helped reduce their professional isolation;
- forced them to examine critically their core educational values and actions as school leaders;
- built their capacity as reflective practitioners;
- enhanced their ability to examine issues holistically and become more proactive leaders;
- allowed them to have more control over their own learning; and
- affirmed what they are doing well as school leaders, as well as reveal areas of growth.



... as trust builds between partners it results in a fertile ground for candid exchanges of ideas about practice, deep reflection on issues dealing with strategic leadership, and self analysis.

Guiding Assumptions and Principles

To ensure that these outcomes occur for participants in the program, PRISM is guided by many of the same **assumptions** underlying the original PAL program. These include that:

- there is no one way to be a successful school leader;
- successful school leaders conduct their daily activities guided by long term goals and ‘big picture’ or strategic thinking;
- the process of being observed and interviewed about one’s work stimulates the professional growth of school leaders;
- professional isolation decreases and reflective practice increases when working with trusted colleagues.

The following provide the **guiding principles** underlying and embracing the PRISM:

1 Know yourself

School leaders examine their leadership styles, values and behaviours underpinning their effectiveness. Before they can lead others, they must be able to lead themselves.

2 Know your organisation

Leaders must be able to understand what elements make schools effective and be able to build strategies of continuous school improvement.

3 Know what you and your school are capable of achieving and developing for children.

Leaders need to know capacities and limitations, their own and the school’s ... and concentrate on the achievable, ensuring the best possible outcomes.

4 Reflect upon your experiences with the support of others

This involves reflecting on issues of leadership and school effectiveness. Leaders and their peer partners implement and critique school improvement projects that they have developed.

Program Components and Timelines

The PRISM Program incorporates:

- experiential learning and learning, where past learnings and actions are examined and reviewed for future planning;
- relevant strategic thinking about what constitutes effective leadership and effective schools, especially exploring big picture thinking as a way for the participants to examine their actions;
- observational strategies to help Principals collect descriptive information about their practices and analyse them against a school effectiveness model;
- opportunities to expand professional networks and learn how Principals are successfully leading their schools; and
- reflective learning experiences which help nurture growth, learning, risk taking and insight into aspects of school leadership and effectiveness.

The Program Design and Structure

The PRISM Program has been designed with two major phases:

- 1 a training phase; and
- 2 a peer-supported implementation phase.

These components are depicted in Figure 1, overleaf. The program is not a ‘one-off’ professional development session; it spans a school year — a substantial commitment for the participants — which includes training sessions and follow-up activities. Figure 1 also encompasses the four key leadership dimensions identified by APC: Educational, Ethical, Strategic and People leadership.

Figure 2 (also overleaf) summarises the timeline of training sessions as well as the between-sessions expectations.

Figures 1 and 2 do not provide a day-by-day breakdown of what happens in the program, what activities take place, what materials are used. They are not intended to. They constitute an ‘organiser’ to give the reader an overview.



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APC Monograph Number 3

Bruce Barnett — *Preparing to Face the Challenges of Principalsip: The PRISM Model*

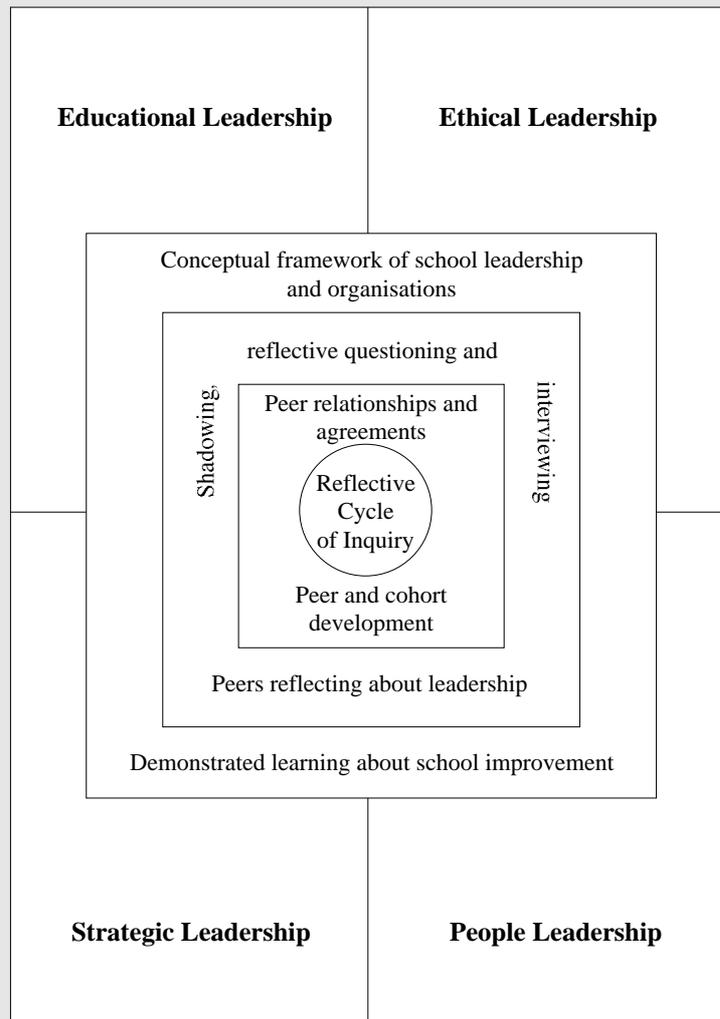
Figure 1: PRISM Components and Learning Outcomes

DAY ONE

- Leadership style profile
- Platforms
- Reflective learning style profile
- Memorandum of understanding between partners

DAY TWO

- Planning a school improvement project
- Backward mapping
- Shadowing
- Reflective interviewing and questioning



Most of the training session is highly interactive and the differing perspectives of the participants contribute to that.

Implementation

We conceptualised this program in 1999 when I was working on course development with Australian Principals Centre. Once we had the basics worked out we approached some of the Regions, to see if they were interested in trialling the program. When the Gippsland Region showed interest, and when the New South Wales Department contacted APC after reading about it on the Centre’s Web site, we proceeded with putting the flesh on the bones.

When we first rolled out the program we had three groups represented among the participants: some Principals from Gippsland, a group of educational administrators and trainers from NSW, and two staff developers from the Catholic Education Office. The NSW and Catholic system participants were open about the fact that they were not there primarily to shadow each other or to engage in reflective interviewing for themselves. They were there more to see whether

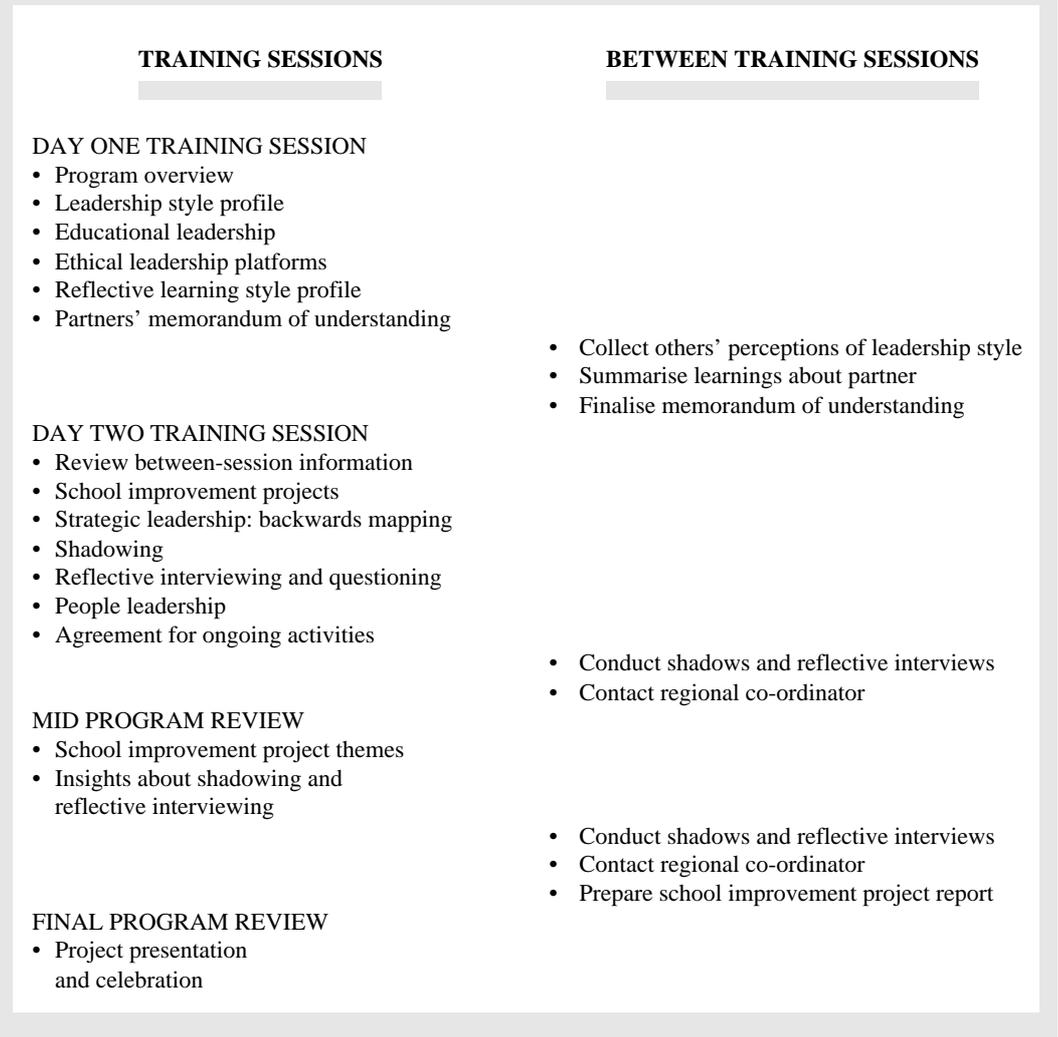
they could apply or adapt the program for use in their own archdiocese.

While the program is specifically designed for Principals, and in principle we might prefer to have participation by just that target group, to have trainers as part of the pilot provided a valuable mix. Most of the training session is highly interactive and the differing perspectives of the participants contribute to that.

By the end of Day 1, the participants have used a Manual containing background and resource materials, have an overview of where they are going with the program and how it is organised, have taken on board the introductory material and have completed all the activities shown for the training session in Figure 2.

One of those activities is the completion of a self inventory; gaining some insights and developing a profile of how they see themselves as leaders. They explore this in terms of four

Figure 2: PRISM Timeline



styles of leadership, taken from the Leadership Style Behavioural Matrix:

- 1 Controller
- 2 Supporter
- 3 Promoter
- 4 Analyser

In a further activity, developing a reflective learning style profile they use another inventory (Kolb, 1984) to explore how they tend to learn and process information, in one of four ways:

- 1 through interaction with other people
- 2 through reflective observation
- 3 through abstract conceptualisation
- 4 through active experimentation.

Every activity is designed for the participants to use it and by doing so to gain insights about themselves, then to take it away, use it with others to learn more about them, and then to share that knowledge.

The participants are also given guidelines (and ideas about to establish groundrules that will make this program work for them) — for example, the amount of time that they are prepared to commit to it; how often they want to meet; what groundrules they want to have when they observe.

We have found that when people are going to be working together in partnership situations over time, to formalise agreements early in this way is really important. Together they decide how they will work together. And they sign it. Putting a signature to how they will work as partners is a whole new approach, based on my experience with Peer Assisted Leadership, and I wish we had done it years ago. We tried the approach with a group last year, and while some found it a little stifling at the beginning, they came back at the end of the year to tell us their experience, and to a person they said things like “It held us accountable to each other” and “Now we knew clearly what we had agreed to”.



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APC Monograph Number 3

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If it didn't work for some people; if they didn't hold to their agreement, then they didn't tell us about it. The agreement is between them. We are not the arbitrators. Not everything that they learn about themselves and each other will necessarily be pleasant, and often they build in an agreement for confidentiality right from the start.

Having looked at the ways of categorising leadership and learning behaviour, by the end of Day 1 the participants are asked to compile a list of information that they need to gather and bring to the second session, using the concepts and skills that they have learned during the session.

Between the Day 1 and Day 2 sessions they will collect information about their leadership style. They have done some of that during the first day, by completing the self inventory, but we then ask them to use the same approach to collect the views of others. They provide the inventory to five people of their choice, who rate them anonymously and give them back the score sheet.

The Principals map the material that they gather, on the matrix grid co-ordinates, to see whether they are being seen similarly or differently by other people, particularly those with whom they work. They take that information back as the basis for part of their discussions with their partners on the second day.

The inventory and matrix material provides background. It can also provide unexpected insights for individuals. I may see myself as a Supporter, but what do five other people say? Some participants find themselves confirmed in their own perceptions, but those who are not may find themselves facing some interesting questions. They can use this for discussion with their partner about why there might have been congruence or differences.

Participants are also asked to come back on the second day prepared to say what it is that they have started to learn about their partner, on the basis of the first session interaction, shadowing exercises or reflective interviews. They are asked what else they want to get to know about them, and what sort of information would be important.

This is a way to focus the information gathering process, and to share between the partners. By the second day, they have learned enough — in terms of content information and processes — to decide how they might best **structure** their shadowing and interviewing. They can organise the components as they start to get a sense of what their partner is about and what is the nature of his/her school environment

On the second day they have a lot of material that they have gathered to work on, but we also ask them to focus on some activity or project that they are undertaking in their school — a project which relates to increasing school effectiveness. They are given opportunities to articulate to their partner the kinds of initiatives they are taking on and how they are handling them.

Having explored what they are doing, the Strategic Leadership component then provides opportunities for them to look at components of the school that they have needed to pay attention to for their projects. The diagram that we use with them at this stage, to help them frame their discussion in terms of strategic leadership and school effectiveness, is shown as Figure 3, opposite. It provides 'big picture' categories for them to work with, such as School Community, or Context, or Climate, as well as more detailed components.

During the day they have opportunities to practise shadowing. Some people tend to think that we can do this naturally. It is a very real skill — just being able to take the notes, for example, while continuing to observe, is far from straightforward. The whole idea of being a shadow, after all, is to watch the partner being as normal and natural as possible. You don't want to inhibit it. We talk this through with the participants and the partners then come up with an agreement on how they want to do things in their own setting.

Not all factors will be anticipated at this stage, of course. In practice, a considerable amount of detail may be involved, and need to be added to the agreement — it isn't just how you take the notes; it's about the stance that you take, where you are going to stand physically to carry out the observation, what to write down, what not to write down, when to write it, what to observe and what to back away from. It's also about having an agreed way to introduce to other people that shadowing will be going on in their context.

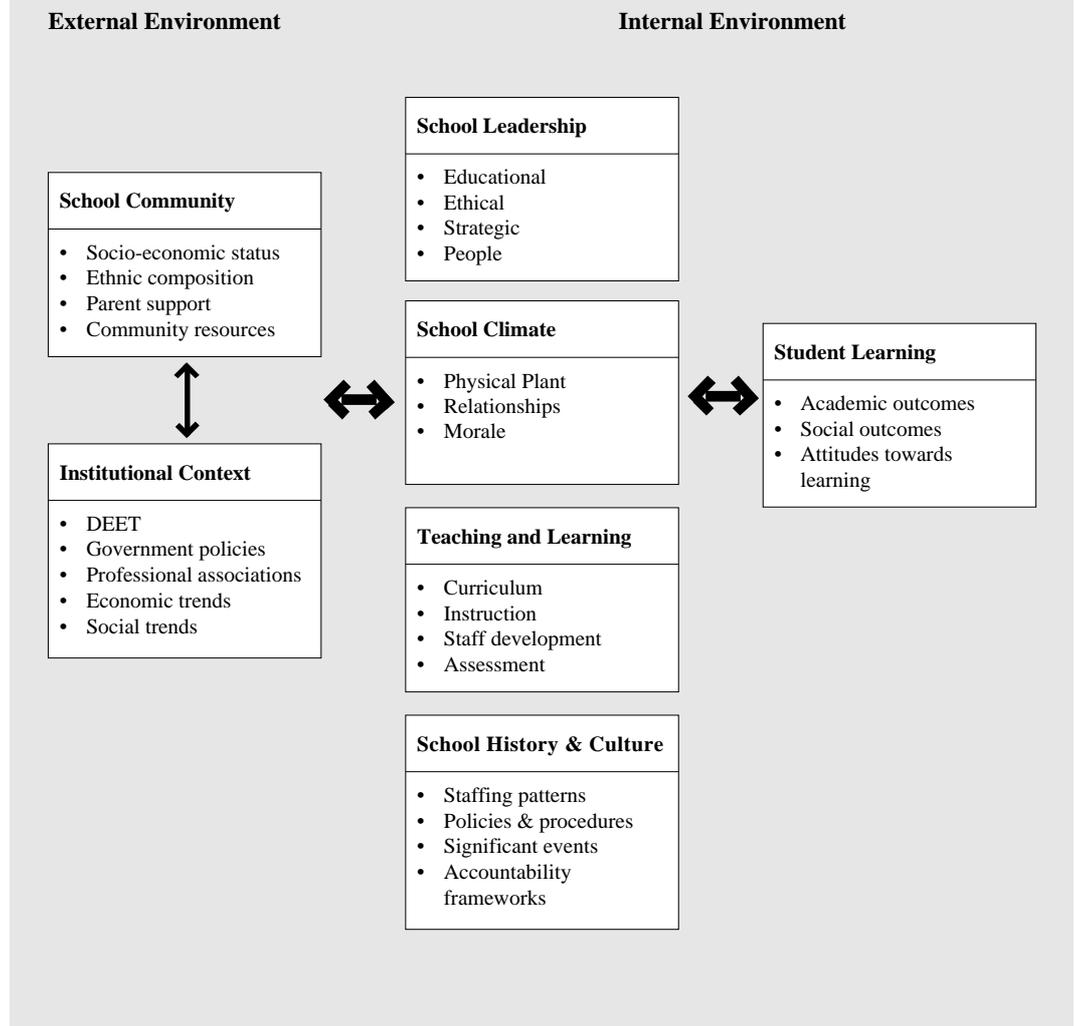
A lot of this 'behind-the-scenes' material is about things that Principals have not considered consciously before. They have never been shadowed before. They need to prepare themselves and they need to practise.

At the end of Day 2, the real goal is for the partners to know that they have a better sense of what each of them is doing in their school and how they can observe each other and provide useful feedback. As an underpinning for their thinking, they will also have looked at leadership not only in terms of the four matrix styles, but also in terms of the dimensions and related values



Some participants find themselves confirmed in their own perceptions, but those who are not may find themselves facing some interesting questions..

Figure 3: PRISM School Effectiveness Framework



The final session is ... an opportunity to celebrate what has been learned.

of leadership that are promoted by Australian Principals Centre (see Figure 1):

- Educational Leadership;
- Ethical Leadership;
- Strategic Leadership; and
- People Leadership.

After Day Two the partners go out and collect more detailed information about themselves and each other in their workplaces.

The first group to undertake the program decided that they also wanted an opportunity for a mid-program review. Given the composition of the pilot program, this could be achieved at a local or regional level, rather than as a whole group, with assistance from appropriate system administrators if necessary. In this case the participants were looking for about half a day to reflect on progress, to update, and to share ideas and experience about how they are completing their particular project.

Following the review, the participants continue with their observation, their shadowing and their reflective interviews and then prepare a report about what they have learned about their partner — framed in terms of the school effectiveness model, as much as possible.

The expectation then is that the whole group comes together again to share what they have learned, not only about their partners, but on a broader level about school leadership and its effects on the projects that participants have been implementing in their schools. The final session is also an opportunity to celebrate what has been learned.

This is only a skeleton of the program. It is designed to give the reader a picture of how the participants acquire and develop tools that they can use, ways of thinking about their schools and how they operate as leaders, communicating their perceptions with their partner, and inviting or providing informed feedback.

APC Monograph Number 3

Bruce Barnett — *Preparing to Face the Challenges of Principalship: The PRISM Model*

REACTIONS — WHAT DO THE PARTICIPANTS SAY?

The school administrators who have participated in the PRISM learning program have had a range of reactions. Some of these can be encapsulated in the following sample comments from evaluation documents. They are verbatim quotes, from ‘real folks’ having experienced the program.

Quotes from participants

- (PRISM) creates an opportunity to reflect actively on my personal actions as a Principal.
- (I have gained) a theoretical basis for reflection and mentoring (and) the basic skills of shadowing and reflective interviewing.
- (PRISM) has given me the ability to reassess ways of doing my job and refocusing on some issues that have ‘dropped off’.
- (I have) the ability to see the diversity in leadership styles and skills. Perceptions from my staff were very rewarding, as I think I am too critical of myself.
- (I have a reaffirmation) of what leadership is (and I can) focus on an area of school improvement in a supportive environment.
- I’m taking things on board to become a better leader and I understand what it really means to be a ‘strategic leader’.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

What is being done through the PRISM learning program should still be regarded as ‘work in progress’. There are obviously ways in which we can improve the training over time, but there is already at least one example of how we are learning from our experience and adapting what we do — to some extent we have been redrawing or reconceptualising the school effectiveness model. What we have done is by no means set in stone, but we are on the journey.

As well as training participants for their own learning, we have effectively been training them as trainers. Whether or not they anticipated that themselves, they emerge from the program in a prime position to share their learning with others. As a corollary, following a Train-the-Trainer model, Australian Principals Centre now needs to decide how the program, the participants, and potential PRISM trainers should be accredited. They also need to decide how the program should be developed — for new participants; for those who have passed through it and who will be seeking ongoing support; and for those who wish to train others.

Currently I would anticipate that a program to become an accredited trainer might be seen in three phases:

- 1 initial participation in the PRISM program;
- 2 a return to the program for upskilling, working on developing participants’ new mindsets and building on their own shared experiences, especially where that will impact on their working as trainers;
- 3 ongoing observation and shadowing by APC, or facilitated by them.

This is still very much at the ideas stage, however. It represents new ground, both for the program and for the role of the Centre itself.



As well as training participants for their own learning, we have effectively been training them as trainers. Whether or not they anticipated that themselves, they emerge from the program in a prime position for sharing their learning with others.

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APC Monograph Number 3

Bruce Barnett — *Preparing to Face the Challenges of Principalship: The PRISM Model*

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