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Quality Australian evidence on leadership for improved student outcomes



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Bill Mulford is an internationally recognised educator with a deep interest and extensive research and publication record in the areas of educational leadership, educational change and school effectiveness and improvement. Professor Mulford's most recent book, published by Kluwer, is *Leadership for organisational learning and student outcomes* and he has recently been invited to be the editor for the Leadership and Management Section of the next edition of the highly respected *International Encyclopaedia of Education* published by Elsevier.

A former teacher, school principal, Assistant Director of Education, Faculty Dean, and Chair of a university Academic Senate, Professor Mulford has high legitimacy within the profession. Adviser to numerous state and national Departments of Education and a consultant to international organisations such as OECD and UNESCO, his is also currently a member of the International Successful School Principals Research Project and International Leadership in Education Research Network, a group of 20 of the world's leading researchers in the area formed to push the edges of thinking and research on leadership in education. He recently completed major OECD and Australian Government commissioned papers on school leadership.

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Abstract

Where do those in schools start sorting the wheat from the chaff, genuine growth potions offering long-term improvement from the elixirs, short-term opportunism and/or unrealistic expectations? The current and growing emphasis on evidence informed policy and practice is as good a place as any. The purpose of this paper is to take up the issues of the complexity and predictive validity of evidence, the need for evidence to be complex enough to come close to the reality faced by Australian schools and evidence that seeks to link leadership and student outcomes. Arising from detailed qualitative and quantitative research, two models are presented for consideration that better reflect this complexity and predictive validity than previous work in the field.

Introduction

Many an Australian school has been disillusioned by the galloping hoof beats of the itinerant peddlers behind new movements who ride in and out of the education field extorting their latest elixirs. Advice from the academic community may not be much listened to given the implication that nothing short of a superman or superwoman as school leader is required. On the other hand, there are reforms and advice that may have great potential for school reform.

Where do those in and responsible for schools start sorting the wheat from the chaff, genuine growth potions offering long-term improvement from the elixirs, short-term opportunism and/or unrealistic expectations? The current and growing emphasis on evidence-informed policy and practice is as good a place as any (see, for example, EPPI Centre, 2001). However, if one is seeking to establish a useful evidence base for school improvement then one

also needs to establish the value of the evidence that is presented.

There are a number of ways of judging the quality of evidence, including its integrity, predictive validity and clarity of definition in the variables employed. The purpose of this paper is to take up the issues of the complexity and predictive validity of evidence, the need for evidence to be complex enough to come close to the reality faced by schools and evidence that, in this instance, seeks to link leadership and student outcomes. Two maps, or models, are presented for consideration that better reflect this complexity and predictive validity than previous work in the field. The first is a model of successful school principalship and the second a model of leadership for organisational learning and student outcomes. The paper concludes by returning to questions raised about the quality of evidence and briefly illustrates the degree to which the two models are comprehensive, descriptive and/or predictive.

Quality evidence: reflecting the complexity of leadership and schools

Researchers attempt to reflect the complexity and thus the reality of practice through the use of qualitative and/or quantitative research methodologies. Of necessity, both methodologies, in the end, involve a great deal of data reduction. What we need to bear in mind when examining the results of either methodology or its respective approaches to data reduction are answers to questions such as:

- Are the results/models comprehensive, do they contain all the key pieces/variables?
- Do the results/models describe/explain the situation in schools by clearly articulating –both the variables and the relationships among them?

- What do I know?
- Do the results/models help understand/predict appropriate outcomes and practice?

With these questions in mind, the paper turns to two models derived from research based in each of these methodological traditions. The first is a model of successful school principalship (SSPP) based on the evidence from qualitative in-depth case studies of Australian schools that constitute part of an eight-country exploration of successful school leadership (the International Successful School Leadership Project, see http://leo.oise.utoronto.ca/_schoolleadership/ssl.html the 43(6) 2005 edition of the *Journal of Educational Administration* and Day & Leithwood, 2007). The second is a model of leadership for organisational learning and student outcomes (LOLSO) based on quantitative survey evidence from over 2500 teachers and 3500 15-year-old Australian high school students. Details of the samples, methodologies, related literature reviews and so on can be found elsewhere (Silins & Mulford, 2002a & 2002b, 2004; Silins, Mulford, & Zarins, 2002; Mulford & Silins, 2003; Mulford & Johns, 2004; Mulford, Silins, & Leithwood, 2004; Gurr, Drysdale, & Mulford, 2005 & 2006) and its application to policy can be found in Mulford (2003a & b).

Findings from two Australian studies

Findings from the SSPP case studies of Australian schools suggest that successful school principalship is an interactive, reciprocal and evolving process involving many players, which is influenced by and in turn influences the context in which it occurs. Further, the findings demonstrate that successful principalship is underpinned by the core values and beliefs of the principal. These values and beliefs inform the principals'

decisions and actions regarding the provision of individual support and capacity building, and capacity building at the school level, including school culture and structure. The principal's core values and beliefs, together with the values and capacities of other members of the school community, feed directly into the development of a shared school vision, which shapes the teaching and learning, student and social capital outcomes of schooling. To complete the proposed model is a process of evidence-based monitoring and critical reflection, which can lead to school change and/or transformation. The context and the successful school principal's values form the 'why' of the model; the individual support and capacity, school capacity and school vision/mission forms the 'how'; and the teaching and learning, student and community outcomes forms the 'what'. The evidence-based monitoring and critical reflection on the 'why', 'how' and 'what' and the relationship between them forms the final section of the model, the 'how do we know' and 'do we need to change' element.

Evidence from LOLSO surveys clearly demonstrates that leadership that makes a difference is both position based (principal) and distributive (administrative team and teachers). Further, it was found that the principal's leadership needs to be transformational, that is, providing individual, cultural and structural support to staff, capturing a vision for the school, communicating high performance expectations and offering intellectual stimulation. However, both positional and distributive leadership are only indirectly related to student outcomes. Organisational learning (OL), involving three sequential stages of trusting and collaborative climate, shared and monitored mission and taking initiatives and risks supported by appropriate professional development is the important intervening variable

between leadership and teacher work and then student outcomes. That is, leadership contributes to OL, which in turn influences what happens in the core business of the school: teaching and learning. It influences the way students perceive that teachers organise and conduct their instruction and their educational interactions with, and expectations of, their students. Students' positive perceptions of teachers' work directly promote their participation in school, academic self-concept and engagement with school. Student participation is directly and student engagement indirectly (through retention) related to academic achievement. School size, socioeconomic status (SES) and, especially, student home educational environment make a difference to these relationships. However, this was not the case in terms of teacher or leader gender or age, having a community focus or student academic self-concept.

Are the results/models comprehensive, do they contain all the key pieces/variables?

The case study research confirms claims that successful school principalship makes important yet indirect contributions to school outcomes. However, the research suggests that the contribution occurs in a more complex way and with a wider range of outcomes than suggested by much of the previous research. Leadership in each of the case study schools was strongly influenced by the principals' core personal values and by the development of a shared organisational values base. Although these core values were similar across school sites, the internal and external school context influenced the way in which they were translated into school practices and procedures. Successful principals also displayed a core set of basic leadership skills regardless of school context, including developing a shared

vision, individual capacity building and organisational redesign. All principals, but particularly those from low SES schools, promoted equity plus social justice through the creation of strong school communities and socially just pedagogical practices and by focusing on the development/reinforcement of a strong learning culture within the school community.

One of the most powerful emerging concepts here is that of 'deep' democracy: respect for the worth and dignity of individuals and their cultural traditions, reverence for and proactive facilitation of free and open inquiry and critique, recognition of interdependence in working for 'the common good', commitment to the responsibility of individuals to participate in free and open inquiry and the importance of collective choices and actions being taken in the interest of the common good (Furman & Shields, 2003).

Within the first model then, a start has been made on describing the nature of each characteristic involved in successful school principalship. However, more needs to be done, especially in fleshing out these descriptions; for example to clarify the ethical, moral and spiritual dimensions of the principal's values (see also Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

Even though the survey-based LOLSO model accounts for some 15 variables, questions could be raised about its relevance for other than Australian high schools. More specifically, it is notable that LOLSO places much less emphasis on the organisational, managerial or strategic than has previously been the case. This should not be surprising when it is realised that there is very little evidence to link such an emphasis to either school organisational learning or student outcomes. Elsewhere our research has discussed allied concerns, such as 'transactional' leadership and its potential for creating 'facades of orderly purposefulness', over-managing and

under-leading 'doing things right rather than doing the right thing', 'building in canvas' and 'procedural illusions of effectiveness' (Mulford, 2002).

Do the results/models describe/explain the situation in schools through clearly articulating the key variables and the relationships among them?

The preliminary SSPP model of successful school principalship highlights:

- the embedded/contextual nature of principal values, individual and organisational capacity and school mission and outcomes;
- the interactive nature of principal values, individual and organisational capacity and mission on the one hand and outcomes on the other;
- the broad interpretation of outcomes, and their interaction with each other, to include teaching and learning, student academic and non-academic outcomes and community social capital;
- the separateness of evidence-based monitoring, implying that professional educators have a responsibility to not just accept, for example, what an employer and/or community may expect, but to critically reflect and, if necessary, act on all aspects of the model, including the context, and their interrelationships.

However, the successful school principalship model needs further work on the congruence and typical sequence among the characteristics, the issue of the ability of successful principals to manage tensions and dilemmas within and between the characteristics and their ability to sustain balance among the characteristics over time.

The LOLSO model has identified the cumulative nature of organisational

learning and allowed us to speculate on a similar sequence in the characteristics of transformational leadership. Among its other findings, LOLSO confirmed the argument that, in a knowledge society, reliance on academic performance as the sole measure of a school's success could be seen as particularly narrow and short-sighted. At the international level, for example, international research by the OECD (2001) for the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) project shows that more than a quarter of 15-year-old students agree or strongly agree that school is a place where they do not want to go and that in almost half of the OECD countries the majority of students also agree or strongly agree that school is a place where they feel bored. Responses were found to vary considerably between countries, which suggests that disaffection with school at this age is, although common, not inevitable. It would be safe to speculate that disaffected, bored students are not likely to be or become the creative or innovative people needed (at all ages) in a knowledge society. There is great need at the present time to broaden what counts for 'good education' and to include measures such as student perceptions of their school and teachers plus their own performance, self-concept and engagement.

Do the results/models help us understand and even predict appropriate outcomes and practice?

In broad terms, the evidence from the two research projects shows that there are three major, sequential and aligned elements of practice in successful school reform. Being innovative is not the first of these elements. The first element relates to how people are communicated with and treated. Success is more likely where people act rather than are always reacting, are empowered, involved in decision

making through a transparent, facilitative and supportive structure and are trusted, respected, encouraged and valued. The second element concerns a professional community. A professional community involves shared norms and values, including valuing difference and diversity, a focus on implementation and continuous enhancement of learning for all students, deprivatisation of practice, collaboration and critical reflective dialogue especially that based on performance data. The final element relates to the presence of a capacity for change, learning and innovation. Each of these elements is ongoing, with just the emphasis changing. Also, each element and each transition between them is facilitated by an appropriate ongoing, optimistic, caring, nurturing professional development program (for problem-based learning materials developed from the LOLSO research, see Mulford et al., 2004). Together, these three elements underscore the importance of leaders understanding and being able to collaboratively change school culture in ways that are meaningful for those on school sites.

This sequence helps 'predict' the end point, that is learning, and the appropriate leadership and professional development emphasis for, and to move from, each stage on the journey. It may be that we need to take these models further by having a set of models representing different groupings of variables and their relationships and sequences, for example for high poverty, rural, inner city, primary and/or public schools. On the other hand, when lost in the complex, 'swampy' ground of schools and their environments a simple compass (head roughly west, be 'transformational' and/or 'distributive') may be much more helpful than these detailed road maps in linking leadership learning, organisational development and successful practice. However, in an age of global positioning systems and models based on quality

evidence that are complex enough to come close to the reality faced by schools and are predictive in that they link leadership and student outcomes, such a response does education and its continued reform a deep disservice.

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