Moral purpose and shared leadership: The leaders transforming learning and learners pilot study

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Michael Bezzina joined the School of Educational Leadership, ACU National as an Associate Professor at the start of the 2007 academic year. For the previous 15 years, he had been in system leadership roles in Catholic education in the Diocese of Parramatta, with responsibility for areas as disparate as curriculum, student welfare, professional and leadership development, special education, and religious education. For one memorable six-month period he even acted in the role of Director of Finance!

In a rich and varied career in education he has been a classroom teacher, school leader, teacher educator, consultant, system administrator and researcher. He has worked in primary and secondary schools and with teachers and leaders in Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Mauritius and Pakistan. He has a passionate commitment to the enhancement of leadership capacity in schools, and in particular, a commitment to finding ways of making shared leadership a reality – a quest to which he brings the perspectives of both practitioner and academic.

Abstract

Shared leadership in education has been the focus of a great deal of activity, but less attention has been paid to shared moral purpose and to the connection between it and shared leadership in the pursuit of learning. The Leaders Transforming Learning and Learners (LTLL) pilot program set out to explore this gap. This paper presents some of the emerging understandings from the pilot, drawing in particular on focus group interviews, journals and web-based discussions as a source of data.

The study reinforces the importance of shared moral purpose, but emphasises the need for explicitness which is supported through a common conceptual framework and a consistency in the use of language.

The experience of the LTLL schools also affirms the place of shared leadership in the pursuit of authentic learning, but at the same time warns against simplistic formulations of how this might best be lived out.

Introduction

This paper explores the role of shared moral purpose and shared leadership in supporting teachers as they strive for authentic learning in their schools and classrooms. Much has already been said and written about shared leadership with its many labels and many forms, but less attention has been paid to what shared moral purpose might look like in practice, and to the connection between this and shared leadership in the pursuit of learning. This gap will be explored through a brief examination of the literature and by exploring the insights which are growing out of a pilot program conducted in nine schools during 2005 and 2006. This program is known as Leaders Transforming Learning and Learners (LTLL). I acknowledge here the contributions to this project of my academic colleagues Professor Patrick Duignan and Associate Professor Charles Burford, who have been closely engaged in the research element of the project.

Shared moral purpose

Whether labelled 'shared whole school vision and goals' (Cuttance et al., 2003) or 'community values' (Andrews & Lewis, 2004) or simply 'moral purpose' (Fullan, 2001; MacBeath, 2005), a shared moral purpose has been consistently identified in the literature as one of the fundamental necessities for bringing about the kind of change and improvement that will deliver desirable student learning in schools.

Barber and Fullan (2005) provide a useful working definition of moral purpose. It is:

> the link between systems thinking and sustainability. You cannot move substantially toward sustainability in the absence of widely shared moral purpose. The central moral purpose consists of constantly improving student achievement and ensuring that achievement gaps, wherever they exist, are narrowed. In short, it's about raising the bar and narrowing the gap.

There is a need for this shared sense of purpose to be grounded in a shared commitment to explicit values (Andrews & Lewis, 2004). In other words, it is not sufficient to have a broad aspiration. There needs to be clarity and detail in the way the purpose is understood – and in particular about the values that underpin it.

The challenge is to find a way to surface this moral purpose and then to make it part of the discourse of the school so that it can be embedded in practice. While the sources cited so far

in this paper give strong support to the need for shared moral purpose, and go so far as to encourage explicitness, they devote more attention to issues of sharing than to the detailed understanding of the moral purpose of which they speak. In particular, shared leadership is seen as a primary way of enhancing the pursuit of, and commitment to moral purpose.

Shared leadership

In a study of leadership in service organisations, Duignan (2003) advocates the need for an important shift in the meaning, perspective and scope (depth and breadth) of leadership in schools, in order to build organisational cultures that promote, nurture and support shared leadership. In other words, increased attention is being devoted to understandings of the exercise of influence within schools which goes beyond the individual in a formal role or with a strong personality. For reasons that range from survival, to efficacy, through to principle, the practice of investing leadership solely in individuals is no longer sustainable (Duignan & Bezzina, 2006).

The arguments for this form of leadership use many labels: 'shared leadership' (e.g. Lambert 2002); 'distributed leadership' (e.g. Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; NCSL, 2006); or 'parallel leadership' (e.g. Crowther, Hann & Andrews, 2002; Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson & Hann, 2002). The search for leadership now is for a property that inheres in the school community rather than its individual members.

There seems to be an assumption that because leadership that is shared reflects a more democratic and collaborative approach, it is necessarily a 'good thing', and that once we accept this conclusion such forms of leadership are easily achieved. Duignan and I have canvassed the problems with this assertion elsewhere (Duignan &

Bezzina, 2006), and these will not be revisited in this paper. Suffice it to say that, while simplistic assumptions about shared leadership are not helpful, there are still powerful arguments supporting its practice.

Having clarified understandings of shared moral purpose, and shared leadership as a means of bringing this into reality, attention now turns to the central pillar of shared purpose in schools – authentic learning.

Authentic learning

Starratt's (2004) challenge to educators is to infuse academic learning with a personal dimension, and thereby to enrich the whole learning process. He argues strongly – even confrontingly – that learning that is not authentic to the needs of the students' life or world is not only *inappropriate* but *unethical*. This is a real challenge.

What does authentic learning look like? Among other things, it would promote:

- development of personal meaning;

- awareness of relationship between the self and the subject/object of study;

- respect for the integrity of the subject/object of study;

- appreciation of implications for the trajectory of one's life;

- application of a rich understanding of the subject/object of study in practice;

- transformation into a more fully human individual.

(Duignan & Bezzina, 2004)

The LTLL pilot set out to explore how leadership and learning practices based on a shared moral purpose might facilitate the work of teachers and leaders in enhancing authentic student learning.

Leaders transforming learning and learners pilot

LTLL was designed and managed collaboratively by representatives of the Australian Catholic University, the case study schools and the systems to which they belonged. It had three major dimensions across the 18 months of its duration.

First, a tentative conceptual framework was developed, which elaborated and made explicit the dimensions of values, ethics, leadership and learning which were seen as likely to contribute to authentic (transformed) learning for students.

Second, the case study schools were engaged in a professional development program which familiarised them with the framework and assisted them to implement its insights in self-selected school improvement projects. This program provided them with exposure to elements of the model and the opportunity to engage with all the other case study schools as they worked through their own school's project.

Third, a research element tapped into participant perceptions using reflective tools, discussions, web-based sharing, journals, focus interviews and school presentations at a closing conference.

There were nine case study schools, drawn from four Catholic educational systems in NSW. Two of these systems were based in country cities and the other two were in metropolitan Sydney. Thirty-three teachers made up the nine project teams who were part of the study.

A conceptual framework was at the heart of the initiative. The researchers made use of the advantage of having a group of schools with a common religious background to work towards an elaboration of moral purpose, and
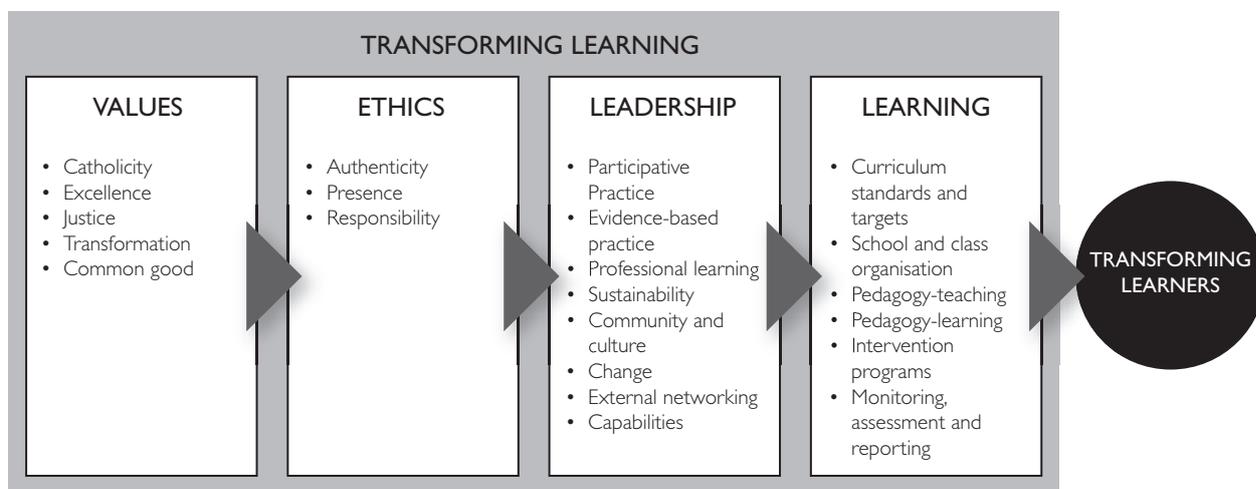
Figure 1: A framework for transforming learning and learners

LTLL and shared moral purpose

Table 1 summarises the perceptions of the nine project teams related to moral purpose, gathered in focus interviews. No specific question asked in the interview addressed this issue directly; however the frequency with which it is mentioned highlights its significance for participants.

The transcripts of the interviews contain numerous references to the moral and ethical bases of leadership and learning. Typical comments included the following:

then to align this in a preliminary way with what they saw as the emerging consensus in the research on leadership and learning behaviours that had been shown to enhance student learning (e.g. Crowther, Hann, & Andrews, 2002; Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002; Cuttance, et al., 2003; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

In the framework which emerged in the case of LTLL, the value system gives rise to the identification of an overarching goal (transformed learners) that can be attained by means of a series of behaviours in the leadership and learning domains (which are themselves value based and ethical). The framework is necessarily tentative, and was intended to be a starting point for structured conversations about values, ethics, learning and leadership in the case study schools, with the objective of exploring understandings of the dynamics at work, and determining whether such a framework would be seen as useful by practitioners.

The model appears in Figure 1.

The findings from the pilot study are summarised below.

the model for me has really emphasised … the moral nature of teaching …

and:

(the model) highlighted the values and ethics that underpin … authentic leadership.

One of the key benefits of the LTLL approach noted by participants was the way in which it made the moral purpose explicit.

We presented different aspects of the model to the teachers and looking at all the indicators … well this is what we should be doing if we are Catholic, or excellent, or just … It was fabulous

Table 1: Perceptions of LTLL case study schools related to shared moral purpose

Theme	Number of schools
The model focused us on issues of identity, authenticity and transformation	8
The values/ethics components were of particular significance	7
Transformation was seen as a key element of authentic learning	6
Leadership is underpinned by values/ethics	5
The need for authenticity, significance – a sense of the big picture in structuring learning	4

because it really pricked some people's consciences.

An important dimension of explicitness was the development of shared language. For example:

> It's the combination of the theory and the bottom end stuff because we've been given, through the theory … a whole lot of language that we've been able to use and validate why we would do things in a certain way, that's made it really logical and so that's gotten everyone on board.

The use of the LTLL process and framework was valued by participating schools for its strong foundations in the moral purpose of their schools, for the way in which it made explicit various dimensions of this purpose through the identification of indicators and the use of consistent language, for its impact on teacher beliefs and practices and for its capacity to engage people collaboratively in consideration of moral purpose.

LTLL and shared leadership

Table 2 summarises the perceptions of the nine schools related to collaboration and shared leadership, gathered in focus interviews with project teams. Again, respondents were not prompted directly to comment on this dimension.

The collaborative nature of the LTLL project was valued by participants for its capacity to enhance professional learning, to overcome tensions around the prospect of change and to overcome the isolation of the classroom.

One comment captured the very real sense of ownership that was a feature of the project:

> So once you own it, in the sense you start leading that learning rather than being passed down from on high, and there's no ownership.

Shared leadership was not taken for granted by participants, and the opportunities presented by LTLL for the exercise of such leadership were valued, while still recognising the essential nature of individuals (and usually the principal) to take strong initiatives. One participant commented about their school's initiative:

> It didn't come from staff, it didn't come about as recommendations of staff, it came about from somebody who had the overview of the school and a very clear and recent overview as a result of school review and recommendations made through that review. So I think that leadership was crucial at that point because the initial conception of the project came from that point.

Thus far the issues of shared moral purpose and shared leadership have been treated in isolation. The focus

turns next to the interplay between these two dynamics.

Shared moral purpose and shared leadership: the interplay

The dynamic interplay between shared moral purpose and shared leadership was accurately captured by a participant in one school's focus group interview, who said:

> Well, I think the further we got into it, the more it became apparent that the more ownership everybody has, and the more you become a leader, the better the quality of learning. And the more we learned, the better all of us became at articulating what we wanted to achieve, sharing what we were learning, and it was almost a natural progression around what took place.

The notion of a 'natural progression' is very compelling. Logically, moral purpose can only be shared if it is understood (made explicit), if it becomes internalised by individuals, and if its internalisation is widespread – factors that are unlikely to come into play in the absence of the shared learning and ownership which are at the heart of shared leadership as experienced in LTLL. On the other hand, the development of shared leadership implies commonality of purpose, clarity of conceptualisation and a shared language – which feature strongly in the experience of shared moral purpose in LTLL. There is a process of reinforcing interaction taking place here.

Simply having named a shared moral purpose, or committing to shared leadership does not wipe away all the obstacles to success. As in all examples of change, anxiety and lack of trust can work to prevent people acting in ways that will reflect their espoused values. The principal's journal of one of the case study schools gives a very clear insight into the role of emotion

Table 2: Perceptions of LTLL case study schools related to shared leadership

Theme	Number of schools
The value of shared leadership/ownership, gaining and maintaining commitment	8
The importance of shared professional learning and dialogue	7
Challenge of involving the whole staff	7
Maintaining staff harmony when threatened by change	7
Awareness that all can contribute to leadership	5
Breaking down silos among department and year levels	4
Teachers and their work being exposed to colleagues	4
There is a need for clear direction from formal leaders	3

– and in particular anxiety – in acting as an obstacle to shared leadership, even in the presence of a shared moral purpose. In the first month of the initiative, anxiety or related ideas were mentioned no fewer than 22 times. In the second month, 15 times. In the third, three times. Journal entries started to thin out after this, but from October 2005 to mid-March 2006 there were only five mentions and from then until the end of the journal in October of that year, only two more. In fact, by then, the absence of fear was itself a subject of reflection. One participant described the experience this way:

> Our relationships have gone to another level because prior to this project, to ask a teacher to go into a classroom would have ……..., well, the project almost didn't go ahead. I mean that was our initial obstacle, the first day we talked about it, we knew what it was going to involve. We were fairly sure everybody was comfortable and the first day it was about to go ahead, the teacher who was going to be visited was just in such a lather of anxiety and I was thinking, we're going to pull the plug because we can't not be present to the extreme anxiety that this teacher's going through and still go ahead with it.

The experience of case study schools illustrates how closely sharing moral purpose and leadership are intertwined within the network of trusting relationships. Without these, it appears unlikely that teachers would have had either the confidence or the reason to engage in taking on the mantle of educational leadership in a collaborative fashion which promoted deepening the sense of shared moral purpose.

What have we learned from LTLL?

First of all, the LTLL pilot has reinforced the importance attached to shared moral purpose by so much of the literature. It has reinforced also the view that there is a need to be quite explicit about this moral purpose, and has demonstrated the usefulness of a common conceptual framework and language, even in a fairly unrefined state. LTLL has also demonstrated the power of the common language embodied in this framework, and how opportunities for discourse will lead to commitment to purpose, and this in turn can act to change teacher behaviours.

The experience of the LTLL schools also affirms the place of shared leadership in the pursuit of authentic learning, but at the same time has reinforced the warning against simplistic formulations of how this might best be lived out. There is clearly a place for strong individual initiative, but in the context of shared moral purpose, this is able to become collective action based on ownership, commitment and shared leadership, rather than a heroic individual struggle.

We have seen the power of placing an emphasis on the moral and ethical dimensions of school life as an enabler of leadership. The interplay between these, as documented in the LTLL experience, was able to move at least one school from a place where individually and collectively teachers were almost paralysed by fear, to a confident and proactive learning community pursuing a deep moral purpose.

The initial version of the LTLL framework is already undergoing modification in the light of the experience of the pilot, and is being used with a new cohort of schools. We look forward to this providing more rich insight into one of the core dynamics of schooling.

It is fitting to leave the last words to one of the case study principals. When she read a draft of the full version of this paper, she wrote to me, in words that capture all the most significant learnings in this paper far more eloquently than I have: (The emphases are hers.)

> I am very proud of where we have arrived, and where we continue to grow. Since 2006 every member of staff has taken a new formal leadership role, some for the first time. The personal growth, confidence, hope and decision to make a difference continue to burn strongly. Even better is the reality that it is unthinkable that a child could fail. Every day continues to be characterised by sweat, determination and the belief that we do make a difference.

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