Network principals in Western Australia: An examination of their influence and strategies

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> This paper presents the findings from an investigation aimed at understanding the leadership role of Western Australian network principals. Prior literature has indicated that there is a lack of empirical research on network leadership despite the substantive scholarly writing devoted to school networks. The qualitative study reported here revealed the contextual influences on the expectations of the role and that network principals' prime intention was to share network leadership with members. For the purpose of mobilising members, network principals employed a deliberate form of influence. In particular, four groups of strategies consisting of 'priming', 'locating', 'shaping' and 'adapting' were identified that supported this influence-based leadership. Additionally, new conceptual tools have been identified that analyse the way in which school network leadership encourages members to exert their efforts towards network purposes. The findings of this study offer fresh insights into the complexities of network leadership. They also have implications for policy, practice and future research in connection with this evolving role.

Introduction

This paper examines the leadership approach and strategies that network leaders may employ to facilitate the work of principals in school networks. In doing so, it reports a study that focused on describing the role of the network principal in newly established networks within the Western Australian (WA) Department of Education jurisdiction. There are three main reasons why providing insight into this challenging form of leadership is important. First, the role of the network leader is significant as it guides democratic decision-making to achieve collaboration towards network directions (Chapman & Allen, 2005; Hadfield & Jopling, 2006; Hatcher, 2014; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Kubiak & Bertram, 2010; McGuire & Agranoff, 2007). Examining the ways in which collaborative efforts are facilitated to achieve the unity-diversity tension (Saz-Carranza & Ospina, 2010) can reveal those effective strategies that are more likely to stimulate network endeavour. Secondly, there has been a call for a discerning theory that might capture the challenge and the essence of network leadership (Hadfield, 2007; Hadfield & Jopling, 2012; Kubiak & Bertram, 2010; Townsend, 2015). Thirdly, pertinent empirical studies have indicated that network leaders' management is usually represented in the form of facilitation skills (Atkinson, Springate, Johnson & Halsey, 2007; Church et al., 2002; Kerr, Aiston, White, Holland & Grayson, 2003), yet the approach leaders adopt in reality remains unclear. The study, which is the focus of this paper, was distinctive in that it provided new conceptual tools for analysing the ways in which school network leadership encourages members to exert their efforts towards network purposes.

The paper is organised according to four main parts for portraying a realistic depiction of the role of the network principal in the context of the WA 'school empowerment'

reforms, which granted increased autonomy to schools. The first part presents an overview of the pertinent literature to identify the approaches and strategies employed by network leaders that have been documented. Secondly, there is an outline of the role expectations of network principals determined by the WA Department of Education. Thirdly, the ways in which network principals in WA employed their influence-based leadership are examined. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications that may be drawn from the resultant insights, for future policy, practice and research.

Approaches and strategies of network leaders

Interactions within networks rely on the goodwill and commitment of their members (Church et al., 2002; Kubiak & Bertram, 2010). Nevertheless, relational strategies, in themselves, are not enough to ensure network success (Diaz-Gibson, Zaragoza, Daly, Mayayo, & Romani, 2017). Also, defining effective network leadership has been difficult because relationships within networks are highly contextualised and continually developing (Benson, 1977). Indeed, much of the research on networks has focused on the benefits of participation, structural variations and relationships (Castells, 2001; Evans & Stone-Johnson, 2010; Hargreaves & Fink, 2005; O'Hair & Veugelers, 2005; OECD, 2003; Phelps, Heidl & Wadhwa, 2012; Watts, Strogatz & Steven, 1998). In this light, the OECD (2003) painted an optimistic picture of educational networks as places that emphasise quality knowledge transfer and innovation that "mediate between centralised and decentralised structures, and assist in the process of re-structuring and re-culturing educational organisations and systems" (van Aalst, 2003, p. 154).

In order to create network effectiveness, Hadfield and Jopling (2006) identified some processes that should occur, from a meta-analysis of English school networks operating in challenging and complex circumstances. Network leaders need to articulate clearly shared values and focus, build trust, and identify barriers that impede effective collaborative practice, which include members over-identifying with their own school's success (Hadfield and Jopling, 2006). To create network clarity, member engagement can be captured by network leaders through making clear the linkages between network purpose, agency, processes and structuring (Hadfield & Chapman, 2009). To this end, Chapman and Allen (2005) contended that network leaders have significant roles as facilitators and managers of relationships. Even in the absence of authority, someone has to guide the collaborative process towards a common goal, particularly when there is a heavy reliance on reciprocal action to create agreements for work to be carried out (Hatcher, 2014; McGuire & Agranoff, 2007; Morrison & Arthur, 2013).

Leadership in school networks can take various forms. Co-leadership is preferred in English networks (Ainscow & West, 2006; Hadfield & Chapman, 2009) as this arrangement purportedly encourages the distribution of member ownership and strengthens the collective power of networks. One way of sharing network leadership between members might be through the process of distributed leadership. The value of distributed approaches to leadership has been described in the literature (Harris, 2008; Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons & Hopkins, 2007) that relates to leaders and followers

(Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004). However, the culture of equitable power within the collaborative nature of school networks suggests the existence of a different form of the division of labour rather than the leader-follower relationship. This observation indicates that there may be distinctive forms of leadership operating in school networks.

Taking into consideration the leader-to-leader configuration within networks, the decision-making power of network leaders could be placed within the context of the sources of social power (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1965). The six sources of social power of leadership are deemed to be coercive, reward, legitimacy, expert, informational and referent (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1993). Developing this typology further, Pierro, Raven, Ameto and Belanger (2012) have referred to 'harsh' and 'soft' bases of social power. The use of such harsh power bases by leaders as coercion, reward and legitimacy are usually identified with supervisors who can constrain individuals' freedom. Conversely, a leader who employs soft power bestows members with more autonomy from the influencing agent (Pierro et al., 2012). The employment of these soft power bases by network leaders seems to be more appropriate in the context of school networks as they enable members to use the freedom of autonomy in accepting, modifying, and resisting network leaders' agency.

Researchers seeking to categorise network leadership often refer to strategies appearing in the extant literature. For this purpose, they have constructed lists of network leader attributes such as facilitation skills (Atkinson et al., 2007; Church et al., 2002; Kerr et al., 2003). On a more conceptual level, collaborative theory and, in particular, the work of Vangen and Huxham (2003) provides a useful tool for understanding the tension between the ideological views of collaboration and the pragmatism of encouraging member agency. Vangen and Huxham proposed that the leadership agency within the 'spirit of collaboration' perspective encourages the 'right' members into the network, empowers them, manages the power inequality between members, and mobilises them towards the achievement of goals. In contrast to generating cooperation among members, Vangen and Huxham also referred to the 'towards collaborative thuggery' perspective, according to which network leaders manipulate the agenda of activities and play politics.

In order to hone network principal leadership to mobilise members effectively, Zimmerman's (2006) cyclical phases of self-regulation used by experts are instructive. In the first 'forethought' stage, experts strategically plan to focus on technique goals and make decisions about how to achieve a goal. In the 'performance' stage, experts consider the environment and self-monitor how they perform a task. In the 'self-reflection' stage, experts self-evaluate and adapt their behaviour according to its success.

Having identified from the academic literature some of the approaches and strategies that are associated with network leadership, attention is now turned to networks in the Western Australian context and the expectations of the WA Department of Education.

The formation and characteristics of Western Australian school networks

For over 100 years the system of Western Australian government school education has been managerially operated as a centralised bureaucracy (Mossenson, 1972). There have been three attempts at decentralising school decision-making dating from 1987, while the latest iteration, namely the so-called 'empowering communities' reforms were implemented in 2011. According to these reforms, the WA Department of Education created three decentralised structures. The first structure was the establishment of independent public schools that were granted more autonomy at the school level. The second structure was the amalgamation of education districts into larger regions headed by one or two regional executive directors. This arrangement meant that fewer regional officers directly supervised government schools. The third structure comprised school networks that promised to bring support mechanisms, which had formerly resided in district and central offices, closer to the schools. School networks were chosen as it was considered that schools could readily access support from expert school staff who reside within a network. This purportedly pealed away bureaucracy and rules that could constrain the work of schools (Western Australian Department of Education, 2011b).

At the time of conducting the study reported here, there were 782 government schools located within 75 school networks based inside eight WA education regions (University of Melbourne, 2013). A WA school network is a group of up to 20 schools which work together and support each other. It was intended that schools should share ideas and resources in response to common interests. Principals decided what network they wanted to belong to and, as a collective, determined the size and shape of their network. This depended on the 'natural fit' of schools with one another, complexity, leadership capacity and spans of influence (Western Australian Department of Education, 2011b). The WA Department of Education funded the role of the network principal so that an elected principal could work alongside his or her peers to achieve common network goals.

Expectations of the role of the network principal in Western Australia

The role was deemed to be a "demand-driven, support-orientated one that does not require intensive, on-going involvement in all schools in the network" (Western Australian Department of Education, 2011a, p. 1). Network principals, as practising full-time principals, were expected to concentrate on meeting members' expectations and supporting "the conditions for collaboration within the network and build relationships that support leadership" (Western Australian Department of Education, 2011a, p. 3).

The WA Department of Education also created a list of eight role expectations that ranged from supporting innovation to planning for crisis and emergency management (Western Australian Department of Education, 2011a). The assumption seemed to be that network principals would use the same leadership approach and strategies to mobilise their peers in school networks as they used in their conventional roles as principals. Balancing the needs of network members with those of the WA Department of Education had the potential to be a challenging situation for network principals,

particularly as they had no formal authority. Furthermore, it was not clear what kind of leadership approach was needed to deal with the complex interactions that meld the interests of members within the elusive circumstances of school networks.

The following section of the paper reports a study that revealed, to some extent, how these network principals made sense of their roles.

A Western Australian study of network principals in school networks

The study involved investigating the perspectives of 20 network principals. These principals were the initial incumbents selected by their peers and had been in the role of the network principal for at least 18 months. Two of the network principals indicated that they had sought the role because they wanted to steer their network to benefit their school; whereas, the others were initially reluctant to adopt the role.

According to their age the participants were all at the mid-career stage (40-55), which appears to be the point when long-serving principals are inclined to make critical career decisions if they feel their career is stagnating (Oplatka, 2010). The selection of participants took into consideration the balancing of gender representation from four secondary, six primary and two education support principals (students with disabilities), which ensured maximum variation of network contexts. Each participant had attended initial Western Australian Department of Education meetings in which the anticipated role was described. They had also attended two workshops concerning general change management strategies.

In addition, the North and South regional education directors were interviewed individually for garnering background information because network principals had referred to the influence of those directors in determining the ways in which networks operated.

The process of participant selection, which represented 55 per cent of metropolitan network principals, was conducted in three phases. The first phase limited the study to the two large metropolitan regional areas in the capital city of Perth. At the time of the study, the North Metropolitan Region contained 242 schools and 19 school networks, whilst the South metropolitan Region contained 251 schools and 19 school networks. Rural-based network principals were excluded because regional executive directors had often appointed them to the role rather than encouraging network members to conduct the selection process themselves. In the second phase, geographical proximity influenced the selection of 10 network principals from each region who were organised into two respective focus groups. In the third phase, five individual semi-structured interview participants were chosen to be interviewed from each education region as a stratified sample based on the network size. The average size of the networks comprised nine schools and the size ranged from four to 18 schools.

The study reported here was concerned with how WA network principals perceived their role within school networks. For this purpose, the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism was adopted because it focused the study on examining the meaning of the social interactions and the context embedded in school networks that related to the role. In particular, the study sought to illuminate network principals' perspectives on the interpretations of social interaction between themselves and those network members who influenced their role. To this end, the central research question was articulated as follows: What are the perspectives of WA school network principals on their role within government school networks? The following guiding questions informed the initial collection of data:

1. What are the intentions of network principals with regard to their role in school networks?
2. What strategies do network principals have for realising their intentions?
3. What do network principals see as the significance of their intentions and their strategies?
4. What outcomes do network principals expect from pursuing their role intentions and strategies?

In the first phase of data collection, the WA Department of Education's *Excellence and Equity: Strategic Plan* for WA Public Schools (Western Australian Department of Education, 2012), *Network Principals* (Western Australian Department of Education, 2011a) and *School Networks* (Western Australian Department of Education, 2011b) policy documents that pertained to school networks and network principals were analysed. These documents provided a rich source of information as to how the role had been framed and initially defined. Furthermore, the examination of regional office records concerning school networks revealed the influence of regional education directors as well as the financial management practices used for supporting school networks. As a precursor to conducting the focus group and individual interviews, documents relating to the specific participants' school networks were also analysed to provid insights into how network principals intended to facilitate the proposed agency of networks. The analyses of these texts focused on contextual settings, meanings, styles and nuances (Krippendorff, 2004).

As already established, the study employed focus group (Freeman, 2006; McLafferty, 2004) and individual semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2007). Focus group interviews with two groups of five network principals were conducted to promote purposeful interaction and dialogue among the participants (Freeman, 2006; McLafferty, 2004), in order to generate emerging themes (Kreuger, 1994). These themes related to how network principals influenced members without appearing to lead them, the location of their role within networks, and the merit of adopting the role. The themes were then used to inform the semi-structured interviews undertaken with five network principals from the North and South Metropolitan Regions in Perth.

The data were analysed using open and axial coding to identify key aspects of influence-based behaviour and dominant strategies. Furthermore, the analysis of WA Department of Education policy statements and individual school network documents helped to

provide an understanding of the context of the role. These analyses revealed the way in which network principals used a hybrid form of leadership in their networks that comprised influence-based leadership engendering four associated groups of strategies, namely the 'priming group', the 'locating group', the 'shaping group' and the 'adapting group'. These groups of strategies are now examined in detail.

The priming group of strategies

This group of strategies is entitled the 'priming group' of strategies because it relates to the application of two strategies that primed prospective members to meet, and then to act, as a collective. Network principals began by using the first priming strategy of 'initiating inaugural meetings' of the network in order to encourage prospective members to meet together. Sometimes, however, convening this initial meeting presented a challenge, as illustrated by the following indicative comment:

> I sent out an email to everybody in what was originally our cell last year. I then thought that rather than having a few schools, it might be opportune to have a larger number, so, I started emailing everybody because I did not get too many replies. Then I rang principals. There were not a lot of discussions backwards and forwards. (John, June 2012)

The second strategy that was evident in this group was that of 'facilitating foundation meetings' which aimed at priming members to act as a collective. Confident network principals facilitated the next few meetings themselves to define network direction and usually employed an external facilitator to help refine the network's purpose and potential strategies. In applying the priming group of strategies; however, they sometimes unintentionally positioned themselves as role aspirants. As one representative participant in the study commented, "it wasn't my intention to get myself elected."

The process of approaching potential members to join a network resonates with the so-called 'courting' category conceptualised by Kubiak and Bertram (2010). This category includes enticing potential members to collaborate by articulating the common bonds between members and the advantages of joining the network. Network principals then began to locate their influence within the network after priming members to join and finding a common understanding of what direction the network could take.

The locating group of strategies

The next group of strategies, namely the 'locating group', represents the way in which these network principals perceived they had deliberately positioned their role of leadership in networks. The first locating strategy of 'conceptualising' the role, represents how they formed an 'educated guess' as to what leadership style would conceivably entice members to add to, and engage with, their network. Network principals tended to prioritise the nurturing of collaborative interactions in making decisions. In particular, they were inclined to employ a servant leadership approach (van Dierendonck, 2011). This style of leadership emphasises a requirement to serve the needs of members by expressing

humility, authenticity and acceptance of the will of the network. These network principals, however, often expressed frustration with this approach because they sensed that members responded by expecting them to implement all the network's projects, rather than assuming any responsibility for the projects themselves. Other network principals claimed they initially adopted a type of discussion-based strategy, which was similar to the WA Department of Education's so called 'oiling the wheels' approach to facilitation.

In adopting the second locating strategy of 'transforming' the role, many network principals indicated a concern that in adopting a servant leadership approach or an 'oiling the wheels' style of facilitation, there was a danger of being indecisive. The 'tipping point' at which network principals decided to transform their role was considered to be when a conscious decision was made to counteract their experience of frustration. In this connection, one participant stated:

> I think the role has moved from facilitation to leadership because we did not know where we were going. There was a need to have some direction and run a vision-setting process. Leadership has come through setting up the decision-making structure. That has been a challenge to keep running and develop. It has been a bit of guesswork. (Richard, October 2012)

Having transformed their role, network principals then applied shaping strategies to structure network decision-making with the aim of solidifying and reinforcing their influence.

The shaping group of strategies

Network principals claimed that they began to think about the purpose of their networks after they developed an understanding of member aspirations. Once their position as a network principal had been established, they implemented the first strategy in the 'shaping group', which is labelled 'generating ideas'. In doing so, network principals asked members to reflect on the direction of their network and to generate ideas about activities that schools could embark on together. A remark made by one participant encapsulated this process:

> I have found that they have to own the idea, especially the secondary [school members] as they have a lot of power. I listen to them and I try to see some merit if there is not. I will say, "I don't think we are going to be able to do that because of…" I have found in the reverse way, if I have had an idea, I sound out someone in the network. It is about lobbying. (Richard, October 2012)

The second strategy in the shaping group is labelled 'facilitating planning'. This involved network principals synthesising different opinions and consolidating options that emerged from the strategy of generating ideas for creating practical actions. This strategy was easier to adopt in those networks in which members had worked together on previous occasions.

The predominant problem in facilitating planning was encouraging schools to commit to the activities that were generated. Accordingly, a third shaping strategy enabled network principals to strengthen their influence by 'configuring networks'. In doing so, they structured and monitored decision-making. This assisted them to create productive meeting agendas and follow-up on network decisions.

The final strategy in the shaping group was entitled 'sharing leadership', which was described by one participant as follows:

> My intention was to identify where the expertise lies in each school, to be able to tap into each school's skill sets in order to validate practice and moderate judgements, what you have internally in your school across the network. Sharing expertise so we actually start to behave like a professional learning community and then we will believe it. (Eileen, November 2012)

On the one hand, network principals attempted to use such structural strategies as creating meeting processes that encouraged members to engage with network activities and promoted equal participation among members. On the other hand, they also took a more pragmatic perspective by adding their own agenda items and shuffling the agenda to place items in what they perceived as a priority order. This need to deal with the paradox of nurturing collaboration while simultaneously steering and managing unity appears to be an especially prominent feature of the shaping group of strategies.

Once network principals had shaped their networks, they claimed to adapt their strategies in order to influence the members more effectively.

The adapting group of strategies

Network principals perceived they used four strategies within the 'adapting group' to calibrate their leadership so they could influence members more effectively. The first adapting strategy of 'interpreting member responses' to the role relates to how network principals identified and dealt with the different approaches adopted by resistant and active members to network activity. Initially, network principals considered that resistant members had not understood the role. Over time, however, they reinterpreted member responses as emanating from a sense of ambivalence towards the role and about the extent to which members perceived the usefulness of networks. One participant commented in the form of an analogy to illustrate that some members wanted a small-scale, minimalist form of leadership:

> I need to respond to that, the negativity. They were saying, "Listen, mate, just give us the [General Motors] Commodore version, we don't need the Merc [Mercedes]." It was people saying, "Yes, I am in for the [implementation of] the *Australian Curriculum*", which was the burning issue for them. Okay, if that is going to support that, then we can come up with giving something that was going to be helpful, like planning tools. We have been making these in our own schools. (Jim, June 2012)

Once network principals understood the relative commitment of each member, the second strategy of 'adjusting influence' was used by them to focus on those active members who were most inclined to engage in the implementation of network activity. Conversely, their frustration with the response of uncommitted members led to 'challenging resistant members' as the third adapting strategy in which they sought to tackle non-responsive members and urge them to reciprocate ideas. On the occasions when this had limited success, they tended to move to the fourth adjusting strategy, namely, 'overlooking resistant members', in which they disregarded the negativity of the non-responsive members. In this connection, one participant commented as follows:

> To get many principals to be together in the same room to agree to an agenda and let everyone have their say was difficult. I needed to change the approach. We just said, "right, six of us are going to do it." (Donna, May 2012)

Adapting their influence and strategies to the seemingly ever-changing needs of members' schools, while simultaneously drawing each member closer to the network direction, was a significant consideration for network principals.

The way in which network principals appeared to be responding to the changing needs of members resonates with Zimmerman's (2006) cyclical phases of self-regulation in the development and adaptation of expertise and expert performance. Firstly, there is the forethought stage, in which network principals took an 'educated guess' in determining what members might see as appropriate network leadership. In the performance stage, experts self-monitor how they perform a task. In the self-reflection phase, experts evaluate the effectiveness of their strategy and then adapt their behaviour. Likewise, network principals evaluated their impact and then adapted their influence and strategies. Through this cycle of reflection, and by using a process of trial and error, network principals reported that they honed a deliberate form of influence to mobilise members. As such, they consciously resolved the tension between, on the one hand, asserting themselves as leaders of networks and, on the other, adopting a nuanced approach to mobilising reluctant network members in an environment of precarious system-level encouragement.

The role of the network principal, therefore, appears to require a different form of leadership than that pertaining to the principalship *per se*. The role is made all the more challenging because of its unprecedented nature within the context of the WA Department of Education. With this in mind, it is instructive to consider the implications of the study that has been documented for future policy, practice and research.

Implications of the findings for policy and practice

The study has two main implications for policy and practice that may enhance the process of the systemic implementation of network leadership. First, notwithstanding the WA Department of Education's intention that there would be access to role-specific professional learning (Western Australian Department of Education, 2011a), network principals reported that the professional development in which they participated focused on general change management and it did not relate directly to their role. In consequence,

and as the preceding commentary has demonstrated, their leadership development tended to rely on experiential, 'on the job' learning. The preceding commentary has also indicated that the role of the network principal was considered to be different from that of the principalship, *per se.* For this reason, it was deemed necessary for opportunities to be provided for the role to be conceptualised collaboratively. From this perspective, targeted professional learning focused on creating school network purpose, agency, processes and structuring (Hadfield & Chapman, 2009) and the linkages between these concepts may have helped network principals to create effective networks and agency in their role. This professional learning for network members may have increased member capacity to act as leaders within networks and to engage their school staff in networks.

Secondly, a clearer and more realistic definition of the role that takes into account what principals want from a network approach may assist network principals in balancing members' expectations, while simultaneously enacting the expectations of the WA Department of Education. This, subsequently, would require an examination of the efficacy of such policies as the *Network Principal* and *School Networks* (Western Australian Department of Education, 2011a, 2011b), which tend to be vague in relation to the accountability required of network principals. Policy statements, therefore, could also include a clearer definition than is currently the case of the role of the Regional Executive Director *vis a vis* the role of network principals.

Implications of the findings for theory and research

This study also generated two main implications for theory and research regarding the way in which WA network principals influenced their networks. First, it is evident that the complexity of disparate systemic and member expectations created initial role confusion. As time progressed, network principals chose how they framed their role according to their interpretation of its context. In this regard, further research would be desirable, aimed at revealing appropriate systemic expectations and contextual conditions that appear to be conducive for developing effective network leadership.

Secondly, further investigation of network members' perspectives of the role may uncover what they can realistically expect from the role of a network leader, and the processes and relational leader-to-leader dynamics that could be beneficial in establishing shared leadership in networks. These processes could be more deeply understood by means of longitudinal, interpretivist studies of members' perspectives upon their role in building reciprocal leadership relationships in networks. For this purpose, it would be desirable for insights generated to be the product of co-construction of knowledge between practitioner and theoretician, which is more likely to portray a grounded depiction of the complexities of the network principal's role.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this paper has offered some fresh insights into the complexities engendered in exercising the role of the network principal, especially in the context of the

WA Department of Education. The role, of course, is made all the more intriguing by virtue of its evolving nature. Given the centrality of this role to the efficacy of school networks, it seems imperative that the day-to-day challenges encountered by network principals, as well as the strategies that they pursue in response to these challenges are fully understood. From this perspective, it is incumbent upon researchers to know and experience in the most intimate and tangible ways the situations their actions purport to affect (Sarason, Davidson & Blatt, 1986, p. xix). Ultimately, it is only this depth of understanding that can prompt appropriate strategies for developing network principals' agency into the future.

Acknowledgement

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