

Spirituality, values and the school's ethos: Factors shaping leadership in a faith-based school

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Studies which examine how educational leadership in faith-based schools is understood and practised are few and far between in the research literature. This is surprising given the important role faith-based schools play within the Australian school system and the controversy that has often surrounded them. Taking into consideration the gap in the research and the debates surrounding these types of schools it seemed timely to examine faith-based school leaders' perspectives on educational leadership. This article describes an interpretive study which sought to uncover how members of faith-based schools' management teams understood and practised leadership. Three different faith-based schools were selected for the study; a Catholic, Islamic and Greek Orthodox school. Four different qualitative data collection methods were used, comprising semi-structured interviews, concept mapping, document analysis and non-participant observation. Using a grounded theory approach for the data analysis it was found that the ways in which these faith-based school leaders understand educational leadership are underpinned by values which often had a faith dimension. In addition, it was found that the school leaders used this framework of faith-based values to guide their practice. It is further argued that the ways in which the school leaders' values and spirituality influenced their perspectives demonstrate the influence of context on leadership perspectives.

Introduction

It has been argued that the field of educational leadership research has generally neglected to consider its role in relation to faith-based schools (Grace, 2003, 2009; Lawton & Cairns, 2005). This observation is important considering that internationally, and in particular within Australia, faith-based schools are growing in considerable numbers (Campbell, Proctor & Sherington, 2009; Symes & Gulson, 2005, 2008). The expansion of Australian faith-based schools over the past four decades has resulted in this sector being responsible for educating a third of all students (Crump & Slee, 2005; Striepe & Clarke, 2009). The burgeoning of schools and their enrolments, along with the increase in Federal Government financial support that these schools receive, have contributed to an increase in the, often divisive, debates regarding the role of faith-based schools within Australia (Striepe, 2011; Striepe & Clarke, 2009). Despite the growing importance and the increased attention devoted to Australian faith-based schools there is currently a limited amount of research which has focused on the diverse range of such schools found in this context (Striepe, 2011).

As the field of educational leadership research has established the importance of leadership for schools (Bush & Glover, 2003), it seemed that a study investigating educational leadership within the relatively neglected context of faith-based schools would offer an intriguing setting for research (Striepe, 2011; Striepe & Clarke, 2009). This article describes a study which aimed to reveal how members of faith-based school management

teams understood and practised leadership. The article identifies three key themes that evolved from the findings which illustrate how the participants' perspectives of leadership were driven by values and influenced by personal factors that often had a faith-dimension. In addition, it is argued that this study reiterates the need for educational leadership research to focus on the influence of context and for the field to conceptualise leadership from more diverse perspectives than has traditionally been the norm.

Faith-based schools and educational leadership

Faith-based schools have been called the phenomenon of our time (Johnson, 2005). In many international contexts faith-based schools constitute an important sector in their respective countries' educational systems, and educate a substantial proportion of their students (Lawton & Cairns, 2005; Sullivan, 2006b). Despite the growth of faith-based schools and the importance of leadership for schools, the field of educational leadership research has tended to place faith-based schools on the margins of its investigations (Grace, 2003, 2009). Although it is acknowledged that the amount of educational research investigating faith-based schools has increased (Johnson, 2005), it is also argued that much of that research tends to focus on Catholic schools and is located within the United States (Arthur, 2005; Grace, 2003).

The international context of faith-based schools shares similarities with the context of faith-based schools within Australia. Australian faith-based schools are broadly referred to as non-government schools and are more specifically categorised as Catholic, or independent, schools. It is important to note that the majority of independent schools have a religious affiliation (Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2012). Faith-based schools have existed within Australia for over 150 years and since World War II this sector has significantly expanded its numbers and types of schools (Campbell, Proctor & Sherington, 2009; Symes & Gulson, 2008). As a result of the increase in faith-based schools, this sector plays an important role in Australia's education system (Striepe & Clarke, 2009). The latest national statistics reveal that 35 per cent of all full-time students are in non-government schools (ABS, 2012; ISCA, 2012). Thus, it is not surprising that in comparison to other OECD countries, Australia has a large percentage of full-time students who attend non-government schools (Crump & Slee, 2005).

Research investigating faith-based schools within Australia is beginning to expand. However, much of what has been produced concentrates on developing frameworks of educational leadership in the Catholic school sector (Spry, Duignan & Skelly, 2004; Whelan, Slattery & Cannon, 2007), or investigates issues connected with the preparation and retention of faith-based school leaders, particularly in the eastern states of Australia (Dorman & d'Arbon, 2003, d'Arbon, Duignan & Duncan, 2002). Consequently, it could be argued that research which focuses on understanding leadership from the perspectives of faith-based school leaders, particularly those in Western Australia, has not received the same amount of attention.

The distinct contexts of faith-based schools, which derive from their distinguishing purposes, characteristics and ethos that influence the school's aims and environments (Halstead & McLaughlin, 2005; McGettrick, 2005) are particularly amenable for developing insights into understandings and practices of educational leadership. In addition, the purposes and ethos of faith-based schools are affected by factors such as: the school's particular faith, its religious traditions and the processes the school uses to select students and hire staff (Halstead & McLaughlin, 2005; McGettrick, 2005). It seems self-evident, therefore, that these distinctive contexts along with the values and beliefs of the school's faith may shape the ways in which educational leadership is understood and practised (McGettrick, 2005; Sacks, 2004).

It seemed especially apposite to locate an investigation of educational leadership within the context of Western Australia's (WA) faith-based schools. The growth of the faith-based school sector within Australia's education system is mirrored in this more specific context of WA. In this context the faith-based sector has flourished. This is demonstrated by the fact that during the period from 1998-2008, nearly all of the new schools established in Western Australia were either Catholic or independent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009, 2012). It is important to point out that in WA the vast majority of independent schools, nearly 80 per cent, has a religious affiliation. As a result of this growth these types of schools are now responsible for educating over a third of all students in the state (ABS, 2009, 2012).

The study's design

Theoretical framework and central question

For this study it was important to understand what Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) have described as the "subjective nature" of the individuals' understandings and practices of leadership (p. 22). Consequently, the study adopted an interpretive perspective because of its concern with understanding how individuals make sense of their world. Based on this perspective's key principle of subjectivism the following central research question was formulated:

How do the members of management teams in different faith-based schools understand and practise educational leadership?

The selection of schools and participants

In order to describe multifaceted understandings of educational leadership a multiple case study design was employed as the strategy to illustrate the findings (Yin, 2009). Accordingly, it was appropriate to use purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) as the technique to select the case schools as well as the participants in order to gain insights into the ways in which educational leadership is understood and practised in these settings.

The final selection of the cases comprised three composite (K-12), faith-based schools, namely, a Catholic school, an Islamic school and a Greek Orthodox school. These three

faith-based schools were selected on the basis that each of them had distinct aims and environments which were influenced by the school's affiliation with a particular faith.

The Catholic school is a part of a wider Catholic system which oversees 160 schools in Western Australia. The values and beliefs of the Catholic Church drive the aims of the school and influence other aspects of the school including its numerous community service programs. This K-12 co-educational school serves nearly 1500 students from a variety of backgrounds.

The Islamic school is a part of a small independent school system that is affiliated with the local Islamic community. The aims and culture of the school are to a large extent determined by its affiliation with the Islamic faith. The importance of upholding Islamic values is considered essential for the school's large student population, which numbered approximately 1,000 at the time of the research.

The Greek Orthodox school is a co-educational independent school which serves nearly 500 students. The nearby office of the Hellenic Community owns, runs and helps to oversee the school. The school aims to ensure that students grow into active citizens by encouraging them to contribute to the community and to develop their understanding of the faith and Hellenic culture.

The participants were drawn from the members of each faith-based school's management team. The selected participants included the principal, the deputy principal or assistant principal and the heads of respective sub-schools. In addition, other members of the management team such as the bursar, the director of mission, the dean of students and the dean of curriculum participated in the research.

Data collection

Four methods of data collection were used for the purposes of this study. These consisted of document analysis, non-participant observations, concept mapping and semi-structured interviews. Initially document analysis provided a means of grounding the study in context. The documents included newsletters, job descriptions, the school's prospectus and policy documents that incorporated the school's mission, aims and vision. After the initial documents were analysed non-participant observations were carried out with all participants. In most cases, the participants were observed for a period of one to two hours and the focus of the observations was on their everyday activities, such as staff and management team meetings, school level meetings, duty times, teaching responsibilities and interactions with other staff.

After the non-participant observations were completed and the field notes transcribed, the data collection process progressed to conducting concept mapping and semi-structured interviews. In this study, semi-structured interviews and concept mapping were combined into one activity, as it was believed it would enable a more accurate picture of the participants' understandings (Newman, 2004; Pegg, 2007). The process began with each

participant recounting a short history of their education and working background before exploring four inquiry areas. These four areas were as follows:

- *understandings of educational leadership*
- *practices of educational leadership*
- *connections between understandings and practices of educational leadership* in which the participants discussed and elaborated on how their understandings of educational leadership were influenced or connected to the ways in which they practised it
- *contextual factors influencing understandings and practices of educational leadership* in which the participants revealed and explained how different contextual factors, such as their personal beliefs, school related factors, the school's affiliated faith, and any outside influences had an effect on their leadership understandings and practices.

The process of data analysis

Patton (2002) has pointed out that it is important to have a specific strategy that can help build an understanding of the phenomenon that is grounded in the large amount of collected data. With this in mind, Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory approach was adopted for the purpose of analysing the data. First, open coding was used to break down the data into named concepts which were then grouped to form named categories by asking questions and making comparisons between the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 63). Secondly, axial coding was used to further develop the categories by making new connections between the categories and by identifying their specifying features (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During these stages of coding, diagramming in the form of concept maps was also employed to help develop categories and as a way to record the development of the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The key insights that were generated from this process are now outlined.

The themes emerging from the data

The analytic processes led to the description and interpretation of cases for each of the three schools. Each case was given a title which reflected the combined perspectives of the school management team's personnel.

In the case of Demos College, the Greek Orthodox School, the findings revealed that the participants' understandings and practices of leadership were orientated towards teamwork. Thus the Greek Orthodox case was named: *Perspectives Built on a Common Vision: Collective Leadership at Demos College*. In the case of Caring College, the Catholic school, the participants' understandings of leadership were built on Gospel values. As a result, the Catholic case was entitled: *Perspectives Grounded in Faith: The Servant Leaders at Caring College*. In a similar manner, the Islamic school, Al-Huda College, also demonstrated how perspectives on leadership tend to be influenced by faith. This was a result of the way in which the participants grounded their understandings of leadership in values that had a distinct faith-dimension. Consequently, the Islamic case was called: *Perspectives Guided by Values: Leading with Purpose at Al-Huda College*.

The findings from the three cases illustrate how the participants' understandings of educational leadership were informed by a framework made up of personal values, which was then used to guide their educational leadership practice. In addition, the findings from the three cases reveal how the participants' perspectives were also influenced by other types of contextual factors that often had a faith dimension. Such observations have been captured in the following three over-arching themes which summarise the findings from the study reported here:

1. Understandings of leadership are value-driven.
2. Practices of leadership are guided by values.
3. Perspectives on leadership are ultimately shaped by the leaders' personal philosophy or spirituality and are enhanced by the ethos of the school's affiliated faith.

Understandings of leadership are value-driven

In all three school cases the participants conceptualised their understandings of leadership by referring to values such as trust, respect, support, empowerment, and serving others. However, these values often entailed a religious dimension. This religious dimension is captured by the following comments from a participant at Al-Huda College. In this case her faith related values comprised the foundation of her understandings. This participant disclosed how Islamic values, which were described as being patient, persistent, calm, respecting others, taking responsibility, and keeping promises, were a "very big influence on her understandings of leadership". Another participant from Al-Huda College reflected that "leading the school... is not as a boss but as a servant, serving everyone". This was echoed in the comments made by another participant from the same school who reflected that leadership is "serving the needs of other people". The connection between leadership and serving others was also evident in the Catholic school case. The participants from the Catholic school attributed their understanding of leadership to Catholic values of serving others, as illustrated by these comments: "I believe leaders are called to serve first and foremost" and "we are called to serve others before ourselves".

The significance of values in the participants' understandings of leadership has been captured by scholars such as Hodgkinson (1991), Starratt (1995) and Begley (2003) who have emphasised the importance of values in conceptions of educational leadership. Furthermore, the participants' belief in service connects with Greenleaf's (1991) secular conception of servant leadership, which involves the element of caring, demonstrating genuine compassion, and a personal level of concern and self-sacrifice (p. 243). Nevertheless, although the perspectives above align with Greenleaf's (1991) model and Hodgkinson's (1991) and Starratt's (1995) view on how morals and values are important aspects of educational leadership, for the majority of the participants in the study reported here, their values had a distinctly religious dimension. The way the participants' personal faith or spirituality was continually connected to their perspectives on leadership appears to substantiate Sullivan's (2006b) and Dantley's (2005, 2008) claim that faith has the ability to transform the meanings of these values beyond how they are generally understood within society. For example, the belief that leadership is about answering a 'call to serve' adheres to the idea that many Christians often adhere to the belief that this work should

have a “purpose” (Sullivan, 2006a, pp. 76-77). In addition, the ways in which the participants from the Islamic school described how the Islamic teachings influence their understanding that leadership is to serve others aligns with Shah’s (2006) contention that Islamic philosophy, particularly the Koran, is the “ultimate source” of values. Consequently, the participants’ understandings of leadership in a faith-based school are, to some degree, distinct from the ways that educational leadership has been traditionally conceptualised.

Practices of leadership are guided by values

This second overarching theme relates to the finding that leaders’ values give meaning and purpose to their leadership practice. However, in this study, the way in which the participants conceptualised their practice, particularly those from the Catholic and Islamic schools, demonstrates the “powerful” influence of faith on leadership practice (Strachan, Akao, Kilavanawa, & Warsal, 2009). The powerful influence of faith is illustrated clearly by one participant from the Islamic school who noted:

I feel values; mainly Islamic values... are the things I need to practise. [Religious values] have to be there, to lead anyone, whether they come from an Islamic background or any other belief it doesn’t matter, those values, the religious values have to be there, to lead anyone. [Leadership] comes from there.

Additionally, the influence of faith on leadership practice is reiterated by the comments of another participant from the Greek Orthodox school:

For me faith and ethos are very, very strong. I have strong beliefs and I like to pass that on to my staff or work with my staff towards having that so that we all interact in a way that supports the ethos of the school... values underpin everything we do, definitely...

Furthermore, the connection between values and practice was made explicit through the value of service. In this study, the participants connected their practice of leadership to the concept of ‘serving others’ which is strikingly similar to Strachan et al.’s (2009) investigation of leaders in Pacifica countries, where the discourse of service to justify and guide leadership practice was particularly evident. This finding is exemplified by one participant from the Catholic school who noted that “I always felt that my role as a teacher was to serve the students... now I am serving more the staff, but it is the same orientation”. The idea that faith-related values influenced their practice was also made evident by how the participants from the Catholic school identified Jesus Christ as a guide or model for their leadership; describing him as “teacher”, “a doer” and a “servant who was called to lead”. As one participant suggested, “I look at the person of Jesus in the Gospels and I see someone who came to serve and he often said I have come not to be served but to serve”.

This observation resonates with earlier work undertaken by scholars such as Begley (2003), Carlin and Neidhart (2008) and Dantley (2008) as well as that of Harris and Day

(2003), which indicates quite clearly that leadership can be underpinned by values. However, the participants' viewpoints in this study reveal how values which are connected to the school's faith affiliation and/or their personal faith formed the very foundation for their leadership practice. Hence, these perspectives equate with Dantley's (2008) view that a leader's faith or spirituality, as well as the school's faith, can be a distinct and significant factor which guides a school leader's work. These influences on the leader's perspectives are further examined in the third theme which describes how such personal factors influenced the participants' leadership orientations.

Leadership shaped by personal philosophy and the ethos of the affiliated faith

This third overarching theme draws attention to the relationship between leadership and contextual factors. In the study reported here, the participants clearly associated their perspectives with personal and school-related factors which included, among others, their past and present professional and educational experiences. This phenomenon is exemplified by one participant from the Greek Orthodox school who credited his mentors and earlier experiences at an Anglican school as key influences on why he became an educational leader and on his orientation to educational leadership: "I am an educational leader because I am an experienced teacher... My philosophy and style of leadership... much of that is in place because of my formative years as a teacher and from my years as a student". As such, these perspectives resemble Starratt's notion that leadership is "autobiographical" in that a leader's work is influenced by how he or she "lives and have lived" (1996, p. xxiv).

More significant, however, is the extent to which the participants' perspectives were influenced by the contextual circumstances of their personal religious orientation and the school's affiliated faith. For example, one participant from the Catholic school commented:

... my own strong faith which I got from my mum and dad, growing up in a country with a strong Catholic influence, [and] the study I am doing influences my everyday thoughts and actions with staff and students and [the school's] community.

This influence was also evident in perspectives of the participants from Al-Huda College. In this case the participants related their perspective of leadership to the notion of service. The participants' understanding of service was influenced by their personal faith, particularly the Islamic Prophet, Muhammad. As one participant's comment illustrates:

Serving others is from Prophet Muhammad. He is a guide to us. He was a servant to the people, he was a leader, a good leader, he was the best leader ... The way he was serving was as a servant to others. [That is] what is expected of a leader.

Another of the participant's comments illustrates how her approach to leadership was supported by her faith: "I feel everything comes from God. That actually strengthens me ... that is the strength I have within myself in dealing with teachers".

As such, these participants could be characterised according to what Grace (2002, p.135) describes as "committed faith leaders"; in other words they are educational leaders who employ their personal spirituality to inform their perspective.

The way these various factors influence participants' perspectives reinforces Sullivan's (2006a) claim that leadership cannot be divorced from its context, as leadership is "intimately and inextricably interlinked with a particular way of life, one that is both personal and part of a living tradition" (p. 76). It is also important to draw attention to how these perspectives relate to the understanding that values are a motivating force on leadership and can arise from a variety of external and internal contexts, such as the self, the organisation and the transcendental as well as the individual's interactions with a group, organisation or society (Begley, 2003, p. 3). Furthermore, these perspectives show how understanding of educational leadership associated practices can be derived from either "an ethic of care, faith and morality" (Dantley, 2005, p. 18), or a "spiritual core" (Bolman & Deal, 2002, n. p.). In sum, these perspectives demonstrate how leadership is not derived from bureaucratic agencies but rather the combined ethos of personal faith and school's affiliated faith or a "sacred authority" (Sergiovanni, 1992, p.12)

Final reflections

As there are few investigations of how leadership is understood and practised in the context of faith-based schools, this article has offered a glimpse of a relatively neglected consideration. It is acknowledged that the three cases featured are set within one state situated in Australia and the findings of the study reported are not necessarily applicable to all faith-based school leaders located within Western Australia or beyond. However, it may also be argued that this study and its findings can be instructive for researchers, for those who are involved with preparing future faith-based leaders and for those who are currently involved in leading faith-based schools.

The findings from the article reinforce understandings of the impact values can have on the ways in which leadership is understood and practised. Furthermore, these findings demonstrate how leadership can be connected to moral purpose. More significantly, the findings illuminate how the meanings of the values were transformed as a result of the participants' faith and the school's faith affiliation. Such connections have implications for those who prepare and develop future leaders and those who currently lead faith-based schools. As the article has portrayed, these perspectives relate to frameworks that leaders in state schools might use to guide their work, but they also demonstrate how the perspectives are distinctive to particular faith-based schools. Consequently, it would be desirable for current faith-based school leaders and those involved in leadership programs to include time for school leaders to identify their values and examine the extent to which those values influence their understandings and practice in order to address the particular

needs of leading in a faith-based school (Lawson, 2005). This is a particularly important consideration given the complex nature of faith-based schools which serve both “God and Caesar” (Grace, 2009, p. 480).

The influence of faith on the participants’ perspectives affirms the importance of context and the need for research to give due attention to various factors that influence a leader’s work. The individual and collective perspectives of the participants take into account the way in which educational leadership can be informed and shaped by values and influenced by factors such as the school’s faith affiliation, ethos and mission. In addition, the findings have highlighted how personal related factors, such as personal faith and education, make an impact on a leader’s perspectives. As such these perspectives help to strengthen Greenleaf’s (1991) and Sergiovanni’s (1992) conception of leadership as being a spiritual and moral endeavour. Consequently, the findings have implications for contemporary conceptions of leadership that recognise the spiritual aspects of leadership as a way to move beyond more traditional notions of leadership (Dantley, 2008; Luckcock, 2007; Shah, 2006).

This article gives voice to a range of faith-based school leaders and offers an indication of how leadership is understood and practised in such settings. Attention needs to be placed on generating further case studies to depict the perspectives of faith-based school leaders in order to create a better understanding of leadership in faith-based schools and provide further evidence as to if and how faith-related values form the foundations of their perspectives. In this way the findings of this study may enhance the body of scholarly and empirical work on leadership and particularly the work of those who are engaged with investigating leadership from a wider range of perspectives.

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