

Leading schools facing challenging circumstances: Some insights from Western Australia

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This paper examines leadership strategies that are most likely to engender success in schools that may be defined as facing challenging circumstances. First, it presents an overview of the relevant literature in order to illustrate distinctive challenges that tend to be encountered in these environments, as well as strategies that are adopted for dealing with such challenges. Secondly, the paper reports on a Western Australian qualitative study of four principals leading primary schools facing challenging circumstances. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications that may be drawn from the resultant theoretical and empirical insights for policy and practice as well as for future research endeavour.

Introduction

This paper is predicated on the simple yet profound observation that leadership can only be understood within the context in which it is exercised. As Gronn and Ribbins (1996) have suggested, context constrains leadership and gives it its meaning. It is, therefore, the vehicle through which the agency of particular leaders may be empirically understood. Nevertheless, while a significant finding of leadership research indicates that context matters, empirical research into leadership of organisations has traditionally lacked such sensitivity to the setting in which it is enacted. Only recently, in the realm of education, has it been recognised that there is a need to investigate how different contexts influence the nature and character of school leadership in order to reveal how school leaders in different environments shape their leadership accordingly. For example, there has been a growing body of work investigating in which ways leadership is understood and practised in the distinctive environment of the small, remote school (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Starr, 2016). Further examples of examining educational leadership as it relates to the context in which it operates are represented by recent attention devoted to challenges of leadership in multi-ethnic schools attempting to construct and nurture an inclusive school culture (Walker, 2004).

There has also been some interest in leadership as it is exercised in faith schools. In this connection, Sullivan (2006, p. 940), highlighted the distinctive expectations placed on leaders to develop a school ethos that is conducive to religious faith, to build connections with the faith community and to articulate the bearing of the faith perspective on how the curriculum is understood. More pertinent to this paper, however, is the focus on leadership in so-called 'schools facing challenging circumstances'. These are schools that are often located in inner city, low socio-economic environments, and are described as encountering "a multiplicity of economic, emotional and social challenges that, in certain combinations, result in constant crisis" (Harris & Thomson, 2006, no page no.). Such circumstances are characterised by increasing intensity and complexity that engender a

level of environmental turbulence requiring different kinds of leadership from those which apply to organisations operating in less complicated and stable conditions.

Taking into account the latter observation, the main aim of this paper is to examine leadership strategies that are most likely to foster success in schools that may be defined as facing challenging circumstances. For this purpose, the paper is divided into three sections. First, it presents an overview of the relevant literature in order to illustrate distinctive challenges that tend to be encountered in these environments, as well as strategies that are adopted for dealing with such challenges. Secondly, the paper reports on a Western Australian study that investigated the ways in which four primary principals deal with the distinctive context of schools facing challenging circumstances. Thirdly, implications are drawn from the resultant theoretical and empirical insights for policy and practice as well as for future research endeavour.

Challenges and strategies

As far as challenges are concerned, Harris and Thomson (2006) have described multiple factors that can have an impact upon schools in disadvantaged areas. These factors include high staff turnover, poor facilities, a lack of resources, falling pupil numbers and constant streams of supply teachers. Harris, Clarke, James, Harris and Gunraj (2006) went further in also describing geographical isolation, selective education systems, poor support from local education authorities, low levels of qualifications amongst adult populations, and poor employment opportunities as additional factors that often compound the problems faced by many schools that are encountering challenging circumstances.

Another contextual factor that may have an impact upon the operation of schools facing challenging circumstances relates to teacher efficacy and accountability. If teachers believe that factors hindering student learning and progress are outside their control, this can create a sense of powerlessness to change things. As a result, a 'what do you expect?' attitude can prevail in the school's culture. Chapman and Harris (2004) supported this perspective in their comment that schools facing challenging circumstances frequently expect little from the community and hence little from their students.

The culture and vision of the organisation can also be adversely affected when there is a high rate of staff turnover, which is frequently the case in schools facing challenging circumstances (Muijs et al., 2004). An associated culture of low expectations may often be made evident by teachers blaming the shortcomings of their students on their parents (Scott Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999). Indeed, Bell (2001) has suggested that the quality of teaching and curriculum in low-performing schools is rarely put forward as a determinant of student academic performance; rather, it is the characteristics inherent in the backgrounds of students which are cited as the reasons for their academic weakness. According to this view, there is only so much that can be expected of schools because the students' home/life circumstances are beyond teachers and principals' control.

The view that there is only so much that can be expected of schools in highly disadvantaged contexts is buttressed by the existence of various external factors which are

brought to bear on the operation and success of these institutions. Such factors may encompass the students' home lives, including parental attitudes toward schooling, as well as financial, transport, cultural and attendance matters. Regarding the United States' context, Jacobson (2008) and Ylimaki, Jacobson and Drysdale, (2007) also cited such correlates of poverty as poor nutrition, inadequate health services, high rates of illiteracy and criminal activity, including drug and substance abuse, as existing in the communities of high-needs schools. It is axiomatic that all of these factors, and more, are likely to have an impact upon students' success at school in a variety of ways.

Taking into account the latter observation, Harris et al. (2006) have advocated that more attention needs to be paid to external factors rendering a school either less or more capable of improvement. That said, while it is useful to be aware of these issues having an impact upon schools, the literature tends not to examine specific strategies that schools may employ to counter their effects to the same degree. On this, Gu and Johansson (2012) pointed out that:

Recognising the dynamic interaction between the internal and external dimensions of school contexts over time is key to understanding the ways in which schools respond to and act upon various favourable and unfavourable, stable and unstable factors in their endeavours to improve school performance. (p.310)

Given the distinctive environments associated with schools facing challenging circumstances, it follows that different improvement strategies are needed from those that might be applicable to schools located in more affluent and stable circumstances (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll & Russ, 2004).

Attention is now turned, therefore, to an enumeration of some of the main strategies identified in the extant literature that have been linked to successful leadership of schools facing challenging circumstances. In particular, these separate, but interrelated strategies include:

- setting a goal and vision to generate a belief in a culture of improvement by establishing clear expectations with students and staff and sharing a vision of improvement (Chapman & Harris, 2004);
- focussing strongly on teaching and learning to generate a belief that all students have the capacity to learn, and the notion of 'cultural deficit' is dispelled (Harris et al., 2006);
- setting of high standards and expectations for staff and students to generate a belief in the school by establishing clear expectations, encouraging respect for others and imparting a sense of urgency for maintaining high academic standards, and exerting pressure upon staff and students to excel (Chapman & Harris, 2004);
- creating a positive school culture to foster a sense of community amongst staff and students and involve the broader community in the work of the school (Harris, 2002);
- promoting continuous professional learning and development of staff to generate a professional learning community, which caters for particular internal needs and/or facilitates out of school initiatives and developments (Chapman & Harris, 2004); and
- exercising flexible leadership to generate creative approaches to tackling highly complex problems, especially by investing in the leadership of others (Harris, 2006).

It is important to emphasise, however, that the literature suggests these strategies are also driven by a strong sense of 'moral purpose'. In this regard, Fullan, Cuttress and Kilcher (2005) commented as follows:

Moral purpose in educational change is about improving society through improving educational systems and thus the learning of all citizens. In education, moral purpose involves committing to raise the bar and close the gap in student achievement... (p.54)

Indeed, Mulford and colleagues (2007), drawing from their survey of leadership conducted in Tasmanian schools, reported that many principals who work in high-poverty communities have come from a similar background and are committed to making a difference to the young people who live in these environments. In similar vein, Harris (2002) further posited that effective leadership practices in schools facing challenging circumstances are reinforced by a principal's set of personal and professional values, which places human before organisational needs.

A Western Australian study of principal leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances

Consideration is now given to reporting a small scale, exploratory study of principal leadership in challenging school circumstances in Western Australia. This interpretive study was deemed worthy of undertaking for two main reasons. First, the published literature pertaining to leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances has tended not to incorporate the context of Western Australia; hence the study makes a distinctive contribution to the field. Secondly, decentralisation and the expanding autonomy of schools have become dominant features of the Western Australian education system. According to these arrangements, principals are increasingly expected to meet a variety of context-specific challenges with more operational discretion than has been customary.

The study was especially concerned with examining the approaches principals of schools facing challenging circumstances in Western Australia have taken to overcoming the complexities and problems they face in their day-to-day work as school leaders. For this purpose, a central research question was articulated as follows: How do principals deal with the distinctive challenges in schools facing challenging circumstances? The study was also informed by the following guiding questions in the initial collection of the data:

1. What are the distinctive challenges encountered by principals in the course of their work?
2. What are the specific issues relevant to the school context that influence the principals' work?
3. What strategies do the principals employ to deal with these challenges in their schools?
4. How do the principals know that the strategies employed are contributing to the success of their school?

The investigation involved studying four primary school principals, selected by means of purposive sampling. The criteria used for selection were first, that the principals should be

permanently placed at their schools; secondly, that they should have been at their schools for a period of not less than five years; and thirdly, that the schools to which they were attached should meet the definition of schools facing challenging circumstances according to two main conditions. The first condition was that the school had a low *Socio-Economic Index* (SEI) number. The SEI is based on three variables: occupation, education and income. It is calculated using the Australian Bureau of Statistics census data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011) obtained from collection districts around the school rather than from a school's specific enrolment data. Western Australian schools' SEI scores range from 50 to 128 with 50 being low and 128 being high. For the purpose of this study, participant schools were classified with SEIs of < 93.0. The second condition governing the selection of the school was that it had to be classified by the Western Australian Department of Education as a Metropolitan Teaching Program (MTP) school (formerly known as a 'difficult to staff school'). Schools classified as being an MTP school attract an additional salary allowance for teachers.

The data were collected using qualitative research methods comprising in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the four principals, analysis of school program information documents, and informal, on-site observation. These data were analysed according to open coding techniques in order to identify dominant themes. Ultimately, and resonating, perhaps, with the extant literature, three themes were identified that encapsulated the ways in which principals dealt with the challenges they encountered; namely, 'moral purpose', 'relationships and trust', and 'community connection'. Each of these themes is now examined in turn.

The principals attached strong moral purpose to their work

It was clear that the participants were driven by a sense of duty to serve their schools and respective communities in what they perceived to be the best way possible. This, in practice, meant that they sought to ameliorate the challenges particular to their school, countering them with actions aimed at 'levelling the playing field'. As such, they tended to adopt a 'no excuses' mentality when it came to dealing with staff, students and parents, coupled with a 'whatever it takes' attitude to their work.

This typically entailed providing programs to support student and, at times, parental need. Indeed, high expectations were held by participants of all stakeholders and the vision of the school was aligned in such a way as to support, and ultimately meet, these expectations. In this regard the following statement from one of the participants is indicative:

The other thing to me that was really important was the high expectations. So right from the word go there were no '... yeah buts' [no excuses] in our school. So we had these signs up, 'No Yeahbuts — little monsters don't live here'. That everything is a possibility.

Here, it is apposite to recall Bush and Glover's (2014, p.559) comment that the emphasis of moral leadership relies on integrity and that the critical focus of such leadership is on the values, beliefs and ethics of the leaders themselves. Likewise, Newman's (2004) study of Jamaican principals revealed that moral purpose was a key motivation, which

influenced them in their work, finding that they anchored their behaviour, interactions and decisions in the dominant values of care, social justice and excellence (p.164). Values also influenced the work of the participant principals in the study being reported here and underscored the actions they took as they went about their day-to-day endeavours.

Furthermore, each of the principals claimed to understand fully the complexities of their context, as well as the culture of the school and the community, and that this strengthened their confidence in dealing with local issues and problems. Indeed, the study revealed that those school leaders who grew up in an area similar to the one in which schools facing challenging circumstances tend to be located are more equipped to empathise with students and the challenges they face. On this, one of the participants commented, "I feel comfortable in this environment and that's probably because I grew up in an area just like this".

Harris and Thomson (2006) have made a similar observation about principals of schools facing challenging circumstances. According to these authors, the research evidence suggests that principals who work in these types of schools in England often originate from similar socio-economic backgrounds. They are frequently inclined to have deliberately chosen to work in schools located in disadvantaged communities and are driven by a strong sense of moral purpose in seeking to improve the life chances of the young people who live in them.

The principals built relationships and trust with stakeholders

The participants claimed they all practised being visible, approachable, honest and open with parents, students and teachers alike. This behaviour was manifested in a variety of ways. These included being present at the school gate and using this as an opportunity to have short informal 'chats' with parents and students, and taking an interest in the lives of the students and their families. As one of the participants remarked:

One of the key things that I loved to do at the beginning was to meet the parents at the gate in the morning — say 'good morning', welcome them in and say goodbye to them in the afternoon. In a context like [school] where multi-cultural families don't speak English sometimes, they always understand a warm and welcoming face. So it was actually being present in the community. It was uncomfortable for me to talk to people who couldn't understand me at the beginning, but they began to know and trust me, and they'd stop and they'd smile and all of those sorts of things.

In this connection, Harris, (2006) has commented that effective leaders engage with their communities and engender trust with parents by showing their genuine care for their children. The principals in the study being reported here spoke in such terms. They claimed it is important to involve parents in a variety of school-based programs, as well as in school governance through participation on the school board or in parents and citizens associations.

The creation of relationships and trust with stakeholders was further facilitated, they claimed, by proactive approaches that they adopted in dealing with school matters. For

example, they indicated they were proactive when dealing with issues of student misbehaviour and, while reporting that at times parents did not agree with the way in which these issues were handled, the parents, nevertheless, appreciated being contacted and informed of what had been happening at the school. The participants also indicated that they were proactive in their attempts to have parents and community members involved with their schools, including running such programs as playgroups for children up to 3 years of age and offering adult literacy classes. They perceived that this welcoming and supportive approach greatly assisted them in developing effective working relationships with stakeholders, thus engendering two-way trust between parents and the school. This, they felt was appreciated by parents because they sensed they were being included in the school community.

The principals connected with their communities

Closely related to the theme above, participant principals introduced or supported programs that were deemed to meet the particular needs of the community. They were acutely aware that many families were living on low incomes and they attempted to minimise the impact of poverty by means of such initiatives as the provision of breakfast for children, and making low cost uniforms available. In addition, a 'passport program' operating in two of the schools entailed parents volunteering in classrooms and earning points, which could then be used to subsidise various school-related costs. Other connections with the community were made by, for example, recognising and celebrating cultural difference in the school community through the promotion of such initiatives as National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee and Harmony days. In this connection, Khalifa et al. (2015, p.23) stated that:

... educators who venture out of the school setting to establish a constant and positive presence in the school's community will significantly improve their relationships with parents and, ultimately, the education for children.

The participants also connected with appropriate outside agencies resulting in a variety of services being made available to parents and students at the school. For example, the 'mums and bubs' club at one school had the aim of supporting parents with child development matters and assisting them with access to child health services. The participants' schools also provided students and families with access to either school chaplains or youth workers. One of the schools in recognising a high rate of adult illiteracy in the community, arranged for adult literacy classes to be held on the school site. In short, it may be argued that the participants saw their schools as constituting a central pillar of their communities and took every opportunity to maintain strong and meaningful connections with them. A typical comment from the participants in this regard was as follows:

Community involvement was a crucial factor in getting a climate, a positive climate in the school, to actually provide for these students.

This approach resonates with the research undertaken by Ahumada et al. (2015) in Chile, which found that when people have a greater connection to their context, it is more likely

that they will exercise an active role in the school (p.12). In a similar vein, Barnett and Stevenson (2016, p.32) reported that the ability of principals of high needs schools in gaining an understanding of the factors that affect the community context, especially the values and assets of parents and community organisations, is an important characteristic of their actions.

In summary, it may be asserted that the participants in this study all had a deep understanding of the contexts in which they worked. They were each driven by a strong sense of moral purpose underscored by the belief that they had a duty to do the very best for the students in their care. They were also sharply aware of the potential barriers obstructing the achievement of success and worked hard to overcome these in a variety of ways.

Implications of the findings for policy and practice

This study has generated some valuable insights into the manner in which the participant principals went about their work in Western Australian primary schools facing challenging circumstances. A number of implications arise from these insights for policy and practice. First, and without meaning to state the obvious, it would be desirable for policy makers, system administrators and practitioners involved in the broad realm of education to develop a more intricate understanding of the distinctive nature of schools facing challenging circumstances in Western Australia. This understanding would benefit from being informed by a nuanced definition of the concept of 'schools facing challenging circumstances' as well as from identifying the particular leadership qualities which appear to be most successful and effective in these kinds of schools. In this connection, the availability of a comprehensive, professional knowledge base embedded in the realities of workplaces found in schools and in the environments in which they are located would be most helpful (Clarke & Wildy, 2010). This, as is suggested later, has implications for the conduct of research.

Another implication that may be derived from the study applies to the often-neglected area of selection for the principalship. Historically, the selection of principals for Western Australian Government schools has been undertaken at the central-office level, with applicants applying to 'pools'. This arrangement meant, in practice, that the applicants provided a generic application focussing on what they considered to be their key skills and attributes, and addressing a standard set of selection criteria. This is no longer the case as applicants are now required to apply to specific school locations and are expected to indicate the transferability of their knowledge and skills to a particular context. The outcomes of this study suggest that moral purpose, the ability to build trust and relationships with stakeholders, as well as being able to make strong and meaningful connections with communities, have assisted principals to lead their schools. It would seem, therefore, that recognising and possessing these approaches to leadership are worthy of consideration both by applicants to schools facing challenging circumstances as well as by members of selection panels.

A corollary to the observation above is the implication that may be drawn from the study's findings for leadership preparation and development. In particular, it has highlighted the importance of school leaders being 'contextually literate' (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). It is this ability to read the distinctiveness of the context in which a school is situated that facilitates leaders' capacity to determine a school's priorities and interests, which for obvious reasons is an especially crucial consideration in schools facing challenging circumstances. At the broader level, this 'literacy' entails familiarity with the socio-economic, demographic, cultural and historical composition of the community, which governs the intake of the school. At the school level, it means acquiring data about students' achievement and progress, turning it into useful information and ultimately into strategies for action. School leaders, therefore, require the ability to read the contextual circumstances so that they can act in ways which are responsive to the situation, rendering them better equipped to make a difference to the performance and vitality of the schools and communities they serve.

Whilst this is not the place to engage in a detailed critique of approaches taken to the preparation and development of school leaders, the study has emphasised that in schools facing challenging circumstances, the principal's efficacy will be determined to a large extent by an ability to interact with different stakeholders in the community. It may be proposed, therefore, that amongst other things, it would be desirable for leadership development programs to promote knowledge of the school in a community, of how communities work and of how principals can collaborate effectively with community partners and agencies.

Implications of the findings for research

The study also has implications for research agendas in the field of school leadership. In particular, it serves to challenge the conventional perception as well as the policy imperative that one style of leadership is suitable for all school contexts. A key refrain arising from the study here is that approaches to leadership are required which are attuned to the needs of the school as opposed to being determined by normative theories and models of what is deemed to constitute effective leadership. This being the case, and as mooted earlier, it would be helpful to generate a comprehensive, professional knowledge base embedded in the realities of workplaces found in schools facing challenging circumstances and in the environments in which they are located; an observation that applies equally to schools located in other distinctive settings. For this purpose, it follows that interpretative approaches to research are potentially fruitful insofar as they can help to depict the 'lived' experience of practitioners and describe accurately the realities of their work in given contexts. This approach may also offer clearer direction to practitioners because it is based initially on a consideration of 'what is' rather than 'what ought to be'. Such descriptive theory should be premised on the belief that, if things are described accurately as they are, there is more likely to be agreement on changes that will create things as they ought to be. It may be contended that, in this respect, the study, which is the focus of this paper, represents a precursor to such a long-term research agenda.

Conclusion

Whilst it may be argued that the research reported here presents some methodological limitations, especially in terms of its generalisability, it does serve to illuminate the challenges faced by similar schools as those featured in the study and the kinds of strategies that may be implemented by school leaders for dealing effectively with these challenges. In this connection, it is instructive to refer to the notion of 'user generalisability' (Burns, 1994), by means of which the study may serve to encourage readers to reflect on their own experience in similar situations and enable them to derive new insights, understandings and meanings.

In particular, this paper has reinforced the reality that leading schools is a complex task, especially when they are located in disadvantaged settings. Relatedly, it has also reinforced the conviction that context matters, determining that there should not be a 'one-size-fits all' approach to leadership. Schools facing challenging circumstances deserve special attention because it has been made clear that they require leadership driven by people who possess strong moral values, who believe in the communities of which they are a part, who are able to bring out the best in people around them, and who relentlessly strive to enhance the lives of the students in their care. Indeed, the study reported here indicates convincingly that such a potent concoction of leadership aspirations and acumen can assist those schools in Western Australia which are facing challenging circumstances to improve against the odds.

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