FINDING YOUR LEADERSHIP

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For over 13 years I have been involved in the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP – www.uv.uio.no/ils/english/research/projects/isspp). The Australian contribution to this project has come from research that has been led by Lawrie Drysdale, Bill Mulford and me. With more than 20 countries involved, it has been a productive research project accumulating more than 100 cases studies of the leadership of successful schools and producing many publications including four books, seven special journal issues, and more than 100 chapters or journal articles. The fourth book (Day & Gurr, 2014) has now been published. This book contains 15 stories of sustained leadership success from 13 countries. I want to reflect on the findings from this book, and the broader evidence from the ISSPP, and to challenge readers to find their own leadership voice in all the evidence we have about good leadership. Whilst the findings are focused on principals, the ideas are applicable to all in educational leadership.

The last chapter in the book (Gurr & Day, 2014) provides a synthesis of the fifteen stories. To construct this I conducted an initial thematic analysis, looking for the big ideas that were being described. I then invited two of my educational leadership graduate classes to do the same and, then compared their views with mine. From this I wrote the first draft of the chapter, and then had my co-author add to this from his own reading of the chapters. We then debated and adjusted until we arrived at the final chapter. The findings I am describing here then are the product of many people interpreting the stories.

High expectations are a consistent feature of successful principals, and, indeed, a consistent feature of more than 50 years of evidence from effective schools research. The high expectations are both at a personal and collective level. Their expectations are high yet reasonable, and they are constantly demonstrating and reinforcing this view of the world. The expectations are also individualised and very much about helping individuals to achieve their best, rather than meeting external accountability agendas.

In terms of conceptions of leadership, there is not a model that dominates the work of these leaders. For example, to take two popular views, they are not transformational or instructional leaders, but they show elements of both. They are concerned to motivate and to support and develop staff, and they also concerned to ensure improvement in teaching and learning. Whilst they typically aren't the hands-on instructional leader wished for in the eighties, and perhaps evident again, they are great educational leaders, ensuring improvement in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment by, most often, working with other school leaders to influence teacher practice. For these successful school leaders, distributed leadership is almost assumed as they will openly say that the success of their school is due to the leadership of many, and they genuinely value the contribution of teachers, parent and students. Indeed, developing leadership in others is a focus of their work. In essence, they develop a view of leadership that enables them to lead a school community successfully, and are less concerned with the academic debates that rage about the impact of various leadership styles. Nevertheless, when we look closely at their work, it is clear that across countries and contexts there is support for the four core practices of setting direction, developing people, leading change and improving teaching and learning, articulated in other research (e.g. Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2007). There are additional practices to these and in thinking about the ISSPP and our other research, Lawrie and I include three additional areas of practice: these leaders acknowledge and embrace their influence role; are concerned to develop themselves, as well as develop others; and they have a reciprocal engagement with the wider context to ensure the best outcomes for students (both responding to and influencing context). Across these seven areas of practice we argue for a moral/values-based foundation to the decisions that are made.

In many cases there is evidence of heroic leadership, in, for example, the way principals challenge the status quo, fight for the best opportunities for their students, and have a positive and empowering view of what is possible for a school community, whatever the circumstances. But it is heroic leadership that is inclusive and so Lawrie and I describe it as post-heroic leadership. Whilst there is an obligation on principals and others in leadership roles to exercise leadership, leading a school requires collaborative

and aligned effort by all. These leaders are often heroic, but they do not lead alone, and they are concerned to foster collaboration. For example, whilst they typically have important symbolic roles, and are generally the key story-tellers and sense-makers in their communities, they are careful to involve the school community in establishing a compelling shared vision. Ensuring the vision is lived is important, and typically the leaders act as both guardians of the vision and champions of change.

Successful school leaders are people centred. They obviously get enormous satisfaction from seeing students develop, but they are also concerned to develop the adults in a school community and core to this is their interest and ability in building the capacity of teaching and non-teaching staff to be better at what they do. This is explained in a capacity building model of successful school leadership (Drysdale & Gurr, 2011) which emphases personal, professional, organisational and community capacity building.

A standout characteristic of the principals is the degree to which they are respected and trusted by their school communities. Acting with integrity and being transparent about their values, beliefs and actions, modeling good practice, being careful to ensure fairness in how they dealt with people, involving many in decision making, are qualities and practices that engender respect and trust. Because of this, the school communities rarely challenge the principals if sometimes they have to make important decisions with little consultation; the foundation of respect and trust means that top-down decisions are accepted.

Their leadership characteristics, dispositions and qualities are developed over time. Some had early leadership opportunities, but their success as a principal is generally crafted through a blend of on-the-job learning, formal and informal professional learning, mentoring or sponsorship by significant others, and some serendipity in the pathways to leadership. All the principals are restless folk, seeking new ideas, new ways to do things, new opportunities for their schools, and so they are always developing as professionals.

There are many personal qualities, beliefs and values that help them to be successful leaders. Acumen, optimism, persistence, trust (behaving in a way that promotes the attribution of trust in the leader by others, and also displaying trust in others), tolerance, empathy, alertness (shown through high levels of physical and mental energy), curiosity, resilience, benevolence, honesty, openness, respectfulness, and humbleness were some of the traits on display. They have a strong ethic of care, empathy for others, value individuality and display the transformation leadership quality of individual consideration, believe in freedom and democracy, are good at balancing individual versus collective care, and so forth. Above all they are driven by the desire to provide the best educational environment they can for all students. Even in the most challenging contexts, they view challenges as obstacles to overcome rather than problems that are insurmountable,

and so they are always looking to improve the learning environment. Perhaps using a spiritual, moral or social justice base, or more simply from an understanding of what is possible in education, they have the courage to do what is right to help their students be the best they can.

Descriptions of complex research like that of the ISSPP are only useful if they help those in school to be better leaders. From this short article, and considering some of the many other publications of the ISSPP, here are some key aspects to consider:

To what extent do you believe that your work as a leader matters? The leaders described here not only believe that they can make a difference to the lives of students and staff (and in many cases families), but they believe that they should. Leadership is fundamentally about influence, and in whatever leadership role you have, there is an opportunity and responsibility to help people to be better at what they are doing. Remember that the overwhelming evidence is that of school controlled factors, leadership is second only in impact on student learning to the work of teachers (Leithwood, et al., 2006). Having and being able to constantly demonstrate high expectations will be important for your work and school success.

Do you have frameworks that help you understand your practice? The seven areas of leadership practice noted above might help – influence, developing self, setting direction, develop others, leading change, improving teaching and learning, and responding to and influencing the context – as might a capacity building model of school leadership (Drysdale & Gurr, 2011). The dichotomy between transformational and instructional leadership probably won't help because you need both; neither is sufficient. Ideas about distributing leadership will be important as, at its best, this is about collaborative practice to improve schools. The idea of the heroic leader may still be important because in many situations this might be needed to galvanise a community into collective action. But it is heroic leadership that is collaborative and involving, as schools are too complex for one person to assume such responsibility alone.

The more senior levels of leadership in schools typically focus considerable time on developing adults. *What is your knowledge and skill about building the professional capacities of teaching and non-teaching staff, and how might you improve on this? How comfortable are you in trying to influence the practice of teachers?* In larger school contexts, senior leaders rely more on the work of others to influence teacher practice, and this will then call on team-building skills.

How are you developing yourself as a leader? We know much about qualities, skills and knowledge that seem be important for good leadership. We also know that these can be developed, and that this development will typically involve internal and external professional learning, and may need the help of significant others (mentors, coaches, sponsors, critical friends and so forth). Key to

this is that you have an understanding of yourself, and some understanding of what you might need to develop to become a better leader. Talk to successful leaders you know and develop a network of support to help you achieve your goals. In particular, if you are a principal, or will likely become one, you should have an external support person to help you reflect on your work and how you can improve.

This paper provides brief engagement with a significant research project. But for this knowledge to be really useful it has to influence practice. *It what ways will your practice change as a result of reflecting on this research?*

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