PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP AND SCHOOL RENEWAL

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Introduction

The study upon which this paper is based solicited information on school renewal from a purposive sample of principals initially identified using quantitative profiling techniques (Silcox, Cavanagh and Dellar, 2003). Principals were presented with a series of questions that enabled an investigation of their leadership behaviours with respect to school renewal. The principals' responses provided a reflective insight into school renewal and change processes in their schools. The paper concentrates on an aspect of the study of leadership of school renewal by exploring principal conceptions of renewal, their approaches to implementing a renewal agenda in their schools and how barriers to renewal were addressed.

Background Literature on School Renewal and Leadership of Renewal

This paper is concerned with school renewal as a particular form of educational change. According to Sirotnik (1999) school renewal is about the process of individual and organisational change and involves nurturing the spiritual, affective, and intellectual connections in the lives of educators working together to understand and improve their pedagogic practice.

The term school *renewal* is not only used in a wide variety of contexts but it is topical. In a religious sense, renewal is applied to the concept of being reborn and it was this spiritual dimension that was, to a degree, evident, particularly among American educational writers (Glickman, 1998). The concept of *rising from the ashes*, too, carried across into the research on school renewal. Joyce (1993) indicated that school renewal recreated the organisation from within, through changes that supported a process of continuous self-reflection and improvement of the educative process at every level.

In its most simple form school renewal can be viewed as a process of change or reform. However, some writers see a fundamental difference between educational reform and school renewal. The renewal paradigm involved questioning and redefining values about social structure, democracy and freedom. Educational reform on the other hand, assumed compliance with prevailing values. The reform approach sought to ensure that the functioning and outcomes of education would be in accord with these prevailing values and it assumed that policies, structures and programs could be modified or realigned to realise this intention. Transforming schools, whether directed towards school reform or school renewal, is inextricably linked to the exercise of school leadership (Soder, 1999).

School renewal is a model of transformative change that brings about multi-levelled structural, social, pedagogic and educational changes through human agency (Glickman, 1998; Goodlad, 1996; Sirotnik, 1999).

Differentiating School Renewal from School Reform

From the orientation of both reform and renewal, the process of school leadership is primarily concerned with school change. There is an abundance of research concerning the leadership of

school change and school reform, although a paucity of literature about the role of school leadership in effecting school renewal. Thus, the phenomenon of leadership of school renewal as presented in this paper needed be grounded in prevailing conceptions of leadership and educational change.

Educational reform typically seeks to ensure that the functioning and outcomes of education will be in accord with prevailing expectations of education and it assumes that policies, structures and programs can be modified or realigned to realise this intention. Educational reform is seen to have focussed upon structural change and curriculum modification with neglect of the learning process.

Paradigms of educational change, educational reform and educational renewal, result from how the world, human nature and human behaviour are viewed. The renewal paradigm concerns questioning and redefining values about social structure, democracy and freedom whereas the reform and improvement paradigms assume compliance with prevailing values. Renewal is characterised by teacher responsibility concerning a moral obligation to create and nurture learning environments for their students as well as themselves.

The renewal approach creates schools that are intrinsically self-renewing in contrast to being renewed, being reformed or being improved by imposition of externally prescribed pre-determined goals. This is a *bottom up* change process that assumes sustainable change emanates from the classroom and is supported at the school, district and educational system levels (Glickman, 1998).

In general terms the difference between School renewal and school reform can be presented in tabular form (Table 1).

Table 1
Difference between School Renewal and School Reform

School Renewal	School Reform
Is a process – general sense of direction	Is a program with specific outcomes
Not specifically time related	Has published, short term timelines
About personal growth	Organisational development
Ecological and serendipitous	Planned roll-out
Values the individual	Values the system
Learns from failure	Avoids failure
Values complexity	Avoids complexity
Ethically driven	Politically driven
Continuous, critical reflection	Accountability and evaluation
A spiritual component	Managerial goals
Personal and school growth	Episodic improvement

The most important difference identified between school reform and school renewal is the locus of control. School reform refers to top-down, system initiated, temporally defined processes that need to be done because something is perceived to be operating inefficiently. School renewal, on the other hand, is characterised by a bottom-up, ongoing school community driven approach to educational improvement.

It was acknowledged that in some circumstances principals might have experienced difficulty in initiating a school renewal process because of the requirement for schools to break out of their current worldview while continuing to operate within it. Renewal requires school leaders to work in the present with a future perspective in mind, to manage the present effectively while simultaneously creating the desired future. Adept leadership is identified as critical to the success of renewal programs within a school. As Smith (1999) indicated, leaders of simultaneous renewal need to acquire five critical skills that she identified as essential components in leading school renewal. These included an ability to establish a shared vision; adoption of a change agency role; a collaborative approach; involvement of stakeholders and making explicit statements of the connections between theory and practice in learning and teaching.

However, while effective leadership was identified as a prerequisite for school renewal, according to the work of Lambert (1998) it was not enough in itself. The presence of a clearly articulated and compelling vision for the school, grounded in a reality that described what the organisation would look like when operating at its best was also required. Lambert's view was that too often schools, and the people in them, had a tendency to overly depend on a strong principal for direction and guidance. Within the context of whole school change the principal, therefore, became the context setter, the designer of a learning experience, not an authority figure with solutions.

Methodology

Data were collected through a detailed interview process from a cohort of school principals engaged in school renewal. The interview schedule employed elicited detailed data in a number of key areas associated with and relating to principal leadership and school renewal.

Information from this process was subsequently coded and analysed and relationships between data distilled using appropriate qualitative methods (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

The interview responses were analysed to provide a broader context of renewal as a phenomenon in the Western Australian school context. Recent literature in the area of leadership and renewal implied that school renewal required a particular leadership disposition from the principal, and it is this relationship that is explored in this paper (Smith; 1999; Soder: 2001; Sirotnik; 1999).

Data were analysed in a way that facilitated exploration of the principals' personal perspectives, values, attitudes and definitions of situations as they were seen to apply in their respective school settings. The exploration of a number of individual cases of schools engaged in renewal provided a rich insight into a reality unattainable through statistical analysis alone.

The results outlined in the paper comprise a summary of the constructs identified and elicited from the coded data. These constructs were reduced further to identify common themes, emergent issues, or conceptual content.

<u>**Research Findings**</u>

The research findings have indicated that principals engaged in implementing a school renewal agenda exhibit a particular leadership behaviour disposition. A synthesis of the literature on school leadership and school change recognised similarities between the behaviours of leaders of educational change and leaders of change in other organizations (Mendez-Morse, 1992). The common behaviours identified included; leadership vision, fostering of a shared vision, valuing human resources, proactivity, risk taking, and most importantly, a sense of purpose and mission. Significantly these behaviours were characteristics of the principals in the cases of renewal explored.

Level of Principal Engagement in School Renewal

All principals selected in the research recognised that they were engaged in whole of school renewal and that they had deliberately pursued such a course of action in their schools. The renewal agenda involved primarily a pedagogic focus with associated curriculum issues addressed. For example the principal of Greenfields remarked:
"The school's learning and teaching culture I inherited was reminiscent of the 1950s, and this in a new school setting with merit selected staff. I had no choice but to initiate and implement a renewal program across the school, pedagogically focussed and driven using curriculum provision and student engagement as the desired outcomes".

Interestingly, in the secondary context, the principal indicated that structural issues were also a major consideration in implementing a renewal agenda, more so than the predominant pedagogical orientation seen in the context of all the primary schools. By way of example, the principal of Parkdale indicated: *"It was through school structural change that I was initially able to engage staff and the community in looking at a renewal of our learning and teaching processes".*

There were a number of references to school organisational changes evolving from staff altering pedagogic approaches. Appropriately one school principal indicated that he was engaged in both forms of change simultaneously; implementing system curriculum reforms on the one hand while using a school renewal approach to bring about a renewal in pedagogic practices at the classroom level on the other.

The principals indicated that they were determined to initiate renewal of the schools' learning and teaching program and, as such, started the process by outlining both the direction and expectations for the changes proposed. Each of the principals indicated that he/she commenced the renewal agenda by getting staff to examine existing practice and asking them to defend it in terms of informed practice identified elsewhere. This very clear and strong pedagogic focus to the change agenda was evident from the responses obtained from all principals.

Initial School Culture and Learning Environment Health

The research findings indicated that in relation to the existing culture of the schools examined, a number of issues consistently were cause for concern for the school's leaders. For example, it was evident that in each case the school's teaching culture required significant attention to address

difficulties identified, particularly in respect to what was commonly referred to as a toxic or dysfunctional teaching environment.

Collectively the principals identified the following elements in the existing culture of the school environment that made renewal difficult to implement:

- The school was focused on negative values.
- The school was set up for staff, not students.
- The school community was fragmented and meaning was derived from subculture membership, anti-student sentiments, or life outside school.
- The school culture exclusively was destructive. Staff interactions were characterised by sniping and personal attacks.
- Success was not celebrated.
- Staff morale was generally not good and a victim mentality prevailed. There was not a common sense of purpose for the learning and teaching program evident in the school.
- Often it was evidenced that a sense that individualism and, in the secondary context at least, balkanisation was evident among staff

Common among the responses provided by principals were that didactic approaches to learning were a dominant feature of the schools teaching practice at the time they assumed the leadership role.

It was noted that the level of cultural toxicity varied from school to school. As the principal of Forrestvale Primary School remarked: *"The culture could only be described as toxic with adult needs taking priority over kids' learning needs. The ethos of the school was divisive, excluding, and based on very traditional views of schooling"*. She clarified this position by indicating: *"The school was characterized by distrust and fear. Parents had been kept at a distance from the school and their children's learning. Teachers were very private and afraid of "being exposed" in their work, and students were treated with little respect - even openly disliked. Children's learning was a low priority, with children having poor decision-making and problem solving skills; the curriculum was "dumbed down" with kids sitting silently in rows learning from a textbook or worksheet. Teachers had total power in their classrooms"*.

These sentiments were reflected further in the responses of the principal of Greenfield Primary School. *"In terms of personnel and school operations the school was a basket case. When I was first appointed to the school the teaching was didactic, threatening for students. The parents and the teachers were at war. It was a toxic environment for learning and teaching to occur"*.

The reasons for the toxicity evident in the school scenarios sampled were varied, with responses including conservatism among the incumbent staff, and a general lack of understanding and unwillingness to accept the change imperatives proposed from the school's learning and teaching program by others.

Similar concerns as expressed by the principals of Forrestvale, Greenfields and Rubicon were outlined by the principal of Bottlebrush who indicated that *"... the school change culture was best described as resistant and reluctant, slow on uptake of system imperatives, lack of knowledge and currency, some keen to learn, others fearful. Teamwork could best be described as dysfunctional*

due to lack of teacher leaders, undermining by original staff towards new staff, newly appointed staff created cooperative minority".

In the secondary context the principal's response indicated that the school was organised along subject faculty lines. Issues relating to power and control within the school were identified as initial issues that needed to be addressed by the principal when taking up his appointment in the school. The principal of Parkdale Senior High School noted that his school was *"... characterised by a balkanised silo mentality. Decisions about school priorities were faculty dictated with very little whole-of-school thinking evident"*.

Overcoming the identified barriers and resistance to changes proposed required significant behaviours on the part of the principal, inclusive of effective communication, an ability to build coalitions and teams, visioning and a proclivity towards change agency.

<center>*Staff Resistance to Renewal*</center>

Principals were specifically asked to identify what they perceived were the real barriers to the initiation of a renewal agenda in the school; and further, how priorities for the proposed changes were negotiated.

Some significant commonalities were evident among the responses obtained. For example, consistently, all principals identified the attitude and disposition of incumbent teaching staff as a significant impediment to initiating change in their schools. A continuum of resistance was identified from the more passive mindset of teachers in the way they thought about their work, to a more active oppositional and confrontational approach. As the principal of Forrestvale indicated: *"Primarily they revolved around entrenched staff attitudes and behaviours. Factions on the staff, the disenfranchisement of many in previous decision making processes had created a very change resistant culture among staff"*.

The greatest resistance to renewal came from experienced teachers who were suspicious of change, and or who may have had negative experiences with change efforts in the past. Principals indicated that resistance to change appeared to emanate from a general lack of understanding of curriculum implementation processes and a lack of the pedagogical mind shift required by teachers at the classroom level. As the principal of Rubicon remarked, *"Lack of teacher knowledge about learning and teaching was a major barrier. Previously teachers had not reflected about and discussed their work with others"*.

Developing strategies to overcome staff resistance was an important consideration for the principals in promoting the desired renewal agenda in their respective schools. Resistance to change was addressed by principals, initially adopting behaviours that enabled them to articulate a clear sense of direction to staff and community where and when required. This was achieved by using either directive behaviours of informing (telling) those involved what the change would look like, or by selling the renewal agenda as a better way of achieving desired outcomes to the staff and community alike. As the principal of Bottlebrush explained: *"I was prepared to live with a certain degree of staff discomfort and possible conflict in the initial phase of introducing change that would impact on the way things were traditionally done in the school"*. Likewise, a similar

response from the principal of Forrestvale who maintained: *"I was willing to engage them (staff) in a direct way because I was confident that they would derive benefit and enjoyment from the experiences offered in renewing the schools learning and teaching program"*.

It was evident from the analysis of their responses that each principal believed in approaching the change agenda credibly and with a disposition that had the underlying aim of eventually establishing a climate of mutual trust and cooperation within the school. The principals indicated that as the desired culture of trust evolved, staff participation increased and resistance reduced. The principal of Greenfields commented that *"I realised early that the assumptions that the renewal of our approach to learning and teaching would result in improved student outcomes would require a great leap of faith on the part of staff and to a lesser degree parents. Now some years down the track there is no turning back and staff resistance is confined to only one or two malcontents"*.

This supported the research findings of Hargreaves (1994) who indicated that such balkanised cultures were characterised by staff working in relative isolation from one another and that success in such schools was often measured in terms of the competitive struggle for finite school resources. By way of example the principal of Parkdale indicated that this individualism and balkanization had *"effectively fragmented the professional relationships in the schools"*, making it hard for him initially to garner the support necessary for risk taking, experimentation and renewal desired. It was recognised by the principals that, ultimately, for the renewal agenda to be embodied as part of the schools, beliefs about learning and teaching, staff and community commitment and participation were pre-requisites.

The principals surveyed perceived that before collective action and dialogue could take place, certain relationships needed be built among teachers and other stakeholders within the school context particularly in overcoming the identified balkanisation and individualist orientation among staff.

Principals recognised that by renewing the school with an emphasis on the development of a collaborative culture among teachers they could positively alter the dynamics of individualism and balkanisation that was in evidence in their schools. It was recognised in the responses obtained that the elements of a participative and collaborative teaching culture did not occur through simple decree by well-intentioned leadership or as a result of teachers' mutual respect for one another. The analysis of responses indicated that there was a belief among the principals that such collaborative approaches required the direct involvement and intervention of the principal as an agent of change. The bigger the change the more it had to be well lead.

While some teaching staff dispositions in the schools surveyed were seen as barriers to implementation of renewal in the school, a common action by the principals surveyed was the use of identified staff as catalysts in the implementation of the change agenda. These significant staff members were identified as those who were themselves either fully engaged and/or willing to engage in pedagogical and curriculum reform at the classroom level. Through such staff, the principals attempted to lever a greater risk willing mentality and a greater disposition to change across the whole school by highlighting and promoting their teaching practices. As the principal

of Rubicon stated: *"Once I had a critical mass of staff behind me and the changes proposed, the barriers I had previously encountered fell away"*.

A different approach was identified in Greenfields school by the principal being able to use the school's status as a merit select school as the instrument to create a change willing staff cohort. He indicated: *"As the school was a merit select school I was able to introduce a critical mass of staff who exhibited the pedagogical approaches and curriculum understanding needed to bring about change. I guess I used a divide and conquer approach"*.

This orientation was not uniform, however, with the principal of Bottlebrush expressing her frustration at staff attitudes to school renewal: *" There was a general hostility, indifference and reluctance to renewal from staff. Traditional teacher-directed strategies and thinking was dominated by a lack of a genuine commitment to teaching and knowledge of current pedagogies. Unfortunately strategies were very teacher-directed; traditional, with excessive use of dated teaching methods. I worked with staff who had shown some interest in their learning and teaching practices in order to get them on side with the changes I proposed"*.

The principals surveyed had initiated the school renewal agenda in their schools, and that collaborative cultures either evolved or developed through the process. It was indicated that they commenced the process by adopting an approach that had staff examine existing practice. Staff were encouraged then to defend these practices in terms of informed successful practice identified elsewhere. This pedagogical focus to the change agenda was consistently evident in their responses.

However, it was evident from the findings that collaborative cultures in those schools undergoing renewal did not evolve from principal decree or mutual determination to act in a common way. In the five cases explored, principals adopted an approach that involved them initiating changes within the school environment that challenged the status quo, and as staff gained in confidence with the changes, collaboration evolved.

The Place of Informed Pedagogic Practice in Renewal

In each case surveyed, curriculum and pedagogical renewal was the prime focus of each school's leader when setting a bigger picture orientation for whole-of-school change with staff.
All principals surveyed saw themselves as pedagogical and curriculum leaders. Well read and with an excellent understanding of curriculum they were able to engage in debate with staff and the community on a broad range of learning and teaching concepts. For example, the principal of Forrestvale indicated that she *"... took the "high moral ground" through focussing on kids learning and looking at pedagogy"*. She went on to indicate that, *"In terms of culture, I knew from my own professional readings and study that a collaborative culture, based on open and honest reflection, could be helpful in bringing about improved student learning. During the first part of my appointment at Forrestvale, I was quite didactic in what I wanted from teachers, but I think the results of this were to take teachers away from their old ways of thinking and doing their work, to being much more receptive to new ways"*.

Also, this orientation was evident in the responses from the principal of Greenfields who stated: *"I am a curriculum and pedagogic leader. Curriculum and pedagogic issues drove my decision-making agenda in the school. Priorities for school renewal fell out from this process. For every change the question was asked – "How will this decision or change improve the quality of learning and teaching in the school?"*

Principals saw their role as being leaders of the change agenda. The way they responded to the questions indicated a commonality of belief that they saw themselves as the most important and influential factor in achievement of organisation aims and goals associated with the implementation of the school's renewal agenda.

Responses acknowledged the importance of having a personal vision for the renewal agenda proposed and also recognised that they needed to have the personal confidence and efficacy to effectively communicate this sense of direction and purpose for the changes with stakeholders; particularly teachers, but also with students and the broader school community. The task of communicating a clear sense of purpose and direction for school renewal was a key consideration and leadership role identified in the responses of the principals.

Evidence was provided that in building a culture and ethos of school renewal the principals stressed the importance of experimentation, innovation, involvement (through symbolic action), collegiality and trust in their communication with stakeholders. The language and communication approaches used by leaders within the renewal context was identified therefore by most as critical in developing the desired learning and teaching orientation in the school.

In articulating a vision for school renewal, the principals indicated that they provided a clear link between the aspirations of the school, the capabilities of staff, resources and the learning and teaching environments. Consistently, the principals indicated that their first task was to get the agenda for renewal out into the open, and then only by overcoming the culture of individualistic characteristics within the schools could they create the collaborative approaches desired.

Evidence from the surveys suggested there was a significant level of determination evident to indicate steadfastness in the principal's conviction about implementation of a renewal agenda in their respective schools. In each case the principals were identified as being intensely committed to making a positive difference in the culture of the school with attention directly focussed on improving the learning and teaching outcomes achieved.

Educational literature would tend to indicate that teachers rarely seek collaboration and according to Little (1990) there was a realisation among most teachers that they can do what they are expected to do with a minimum of interaction with other teachers. Little (1990) indicated that, as a consequence of this perception of the teaching function, considerable resentment was identified among staff when the status quo or their personal comfort zones were challenged. This particularly was so in a renewal context in the schools sampled where principals indicated that, in order to develop more collective collaborative approaches in teaching, a principal was often confronted with the task of overcoming this sense of individualism and balkanisation.

Findings drawn from the qualitative data indicated that a major challenge facing principals' efforts in articulating a shared vision within the school context was related to the issue of personal credibility. It also was recognised by the principals sampled that there were many contributing factors to their perceived credibility within the school community context. They indicated, for example, that their track record in delivering the message was extremely important in terms of both its strength and seeming relevance to the situation at hand, as was the content of the message itself As the principal of Greenfields indicated, his credibility as an educational leader in the school evolved: *"… by establishing a clear vision of the school that centred on student learning and not resiling from making the hard decisions in relation to the school's learning and teaching practices. By getting into classes and teaching alongside staff. By being approachable to parents and letting them see that I was really interested in their children".* Further he stated, *"Changes I initiate in the school all have their roots in curriculum and pedagogical thinking and informed successful learning and teaching practice".*

The reputation and relationships of the sender were important in terms of integrity and trustworthiness; so was consistency between the words and deeds of the communicator.

Summary

As expected there was a high degree of commonality among the behaviours identified among the behaviours of principals surveyed within the context of school renewal.

The research findings indicated that principals engaged in renewing their schools learning and teaching programs had a strong disposition towards change agency and visioning and a demonstrated positive disposition towards renewal and change in their schools. The principals perceived they required higher levels of personal involvement to initially establish the sense of direction and purpose for change and then to lead the renewal process that eventuated.

The research identified that each principal had a proactive communication style. The communication style identified was characterised by a genuine interest in ensuring that, while conflict within the organisational context remained minimal, the change agenda was continually progressed. Responses indicated that principals involved in the study had a willingness to move outside existing paradigms in seeking solutions to issues of implementation of school reform and renewal programs.

A very strong theme identified in the study related to the principal's primary focus on pedagogic leadership. Consistently the evidence presented indicated that leadership credibility was enhanced through principal pedagogic understandings, their extensive curriculum knowledge and their focus on student learning and curriculum engagement. Similarly, their determination to effect pedagogic change within their various schools provided evidence of more dominant leadership style behaviours. No-where was this more in evidence than in their determination to address the barriers and resistance to change encountered in the school.

The attributes of the renewal orientation identified in the study are basically consistent with general theoretical propositions about the attributes of effective school leaders and leadership of change identified in current educational research literature.

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