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The complex task of leading educational change in schools

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The leadership of educational change in schools is a complex task, particularly at a time when schools are being granted greater autonomy but are also under greater scrutiny through the publication of high stakes test results. This paper examines the complexity of the task of changing a school culture and the challenges faced by leaders engaged in this task. It is informed by case studies of two principals involved in a project designed to bring long-term change. The study provides insight into the qualities which make change leaders effective, and the different ways that leaders manage the task. The paper concludes with implications for the management and sustainability of change in schools.

Keywords: educational reform; school change; school leadership

Introduction

The role of the principal in schools is challenging and complex, particularly where there is impetus for reform and educational change designed to improve student learning outcomes (Timperley 2005). Recent reforms across the world are granting individual schools more power over decisions made in an effort to improve student outcomes, although the results of these moves are unclear and are potentially at odds with other government reforms including national testing in literacy and numeracy (Caro 2012; DEWR 2012). There are multiple lenses (Fullan 2002; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008; Robinson 2010; Eacott 2011) through which to examine and position the actions of principals as they attempt to balance the activities needed for implementation of ‘big picture’ visions with the daily tasks that require more immediate attention. There is evidence that the short-term tasks often inhibit the process of long-term planning, but a sustained, supported focus on clear, long-term goals can help to ensure that progress is made (Albright, Clement, and Holmes 2012). In this paper, we explore the complexity of the principals’ role as it is enacted during a process of school renewal via long-term goal setting, by firstly considering recent literature related to effective change leadership in schools and secondly through an examination of two case studies of principals in their schools.

Components of effective educational leadership

Effective leaders in schools can have a transformational impact on student learning outcomes (Nettles and Herrington 2007; Fullan 2010), although researchers are still wrestling with understanding the complexity of the principal’s role, particularly as they attempt to implement change in schools (Robinson 2010). In this section, we

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will compare and contrast various frameworks for understanding the characteristics of effective principals and the complexity of the contexts within which they operate.

Robinson's (2010) research identifies the leadership capabilities that successful principals consistently display. She identifies three types of knowledge that are essential: knowledge in relation to the alignment of administrative processes with learning outcomes, knowledge about how to solve complex problems unique to their context and knowledge concerning effective interpersonal skills that would allow for relational trust to be built among stakeholders. There are similarities, here, with the approach of Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008, 29) who argue that 'almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices'. These include building a shared vision and setting directions, understanding and developing people, redesigning the organisation where necessary and managing the teaching and learning programme. Both studies emphasise the importance of maintaining productive relationships with staff, while conducting the teaching and learning activities within the school and ensuring that school structures are designed to enhance rather than hinder effective change.

Williams (2008) expands on this notion of interpersonal skills by emphasising the importance of leaders' emotional and social intelligence. In her comparative study of typical and outstanding principals, six social competencies emerged as significant differences between the two groups: self-confidence, an achievement orientation, initiative, an organisational awareness, leadership and collaboration. Importantly, she also found that outstanding principals developed a broader conceptualisation of their context, beyond simply the students and parents, reaching out to the wider community and larger educational bureaucracy where appropriate (Williams 2008).

A similar focus on the 'people' within an organisation was reported by Mulford (2006), who conducted a study on leadership within a change context and determined that the six key foci of a transformational leader were to provide individual support for staff, develop a caring and trustful culture, establish a participative school structure, develop a shared vision and related goals, set high-performance expectations and to foster an intellectually stimulating work environment for staff. Likewise, Fullan (2010) identifies six features of effective principals. Firstly, they have a strong motivation for action, but should be careful to tend to relationships as they proceed. Secondly, they maintain a position as a learner alongside their teachers, rather than positioning themselves as a dominant figure. Also, they have a consistent focus on the improvement of instruction for the benefit of all students in the school. Next, they are careful to develop others to assist with complex problem solving, and they are networked well beyond the school, for example, they are 'proactive practitioners who critically consume research as they go' (Fullan 2010, 14). Lastly, they have a highly developed moral purpose which leads to consistent action in the belief that all children can learn and then they actively help teachers to achieve this goal.

There are several key themes, therefore, that consistently emerge from the literature in relation to developing an understanding of the work of effective educational leaders in times of substantial change. These themes are summarised in Table 1. Firstly, there is a broad agreement that they should promote the development of a shared vision, developed with a clear moral purpose and achievable goals in conjunction with their staff (Mulford 2006; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008; Fullan 2010). Secondly, that principals should attend to the social context within which they operate, developing trust between all involved, while also

Table 1. Mapping of common themes: effective school leader practices for leading educational change.

Practices of effective leaders	Literature				
	Fullan (2010)	Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008)	Mulford (2006)	Robinson (2010)	Williams (2008)
Development of a shared vision					
Development of relational trust with staff					
Use of multiple sources of information to solve complex problems					
Maintains a focus on the core business of teaching and learning					
Responsive to external demands					

Note: Shaded boxes indicate alignment between literature and effective practices for leaders.

developing individual staff (Mulford 2006; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008; Fullan 2010; Robinson 2010). Thirdly, they should draw on multiple sources of information to solve complex, contextual problems as they arise, possibly restructuring the organisation where necessary (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008; Williams 2008; Fullan 2010; Robinson 2010). Fourthly, there is some agreement that principals should have a sustained focus on the core business of schooling, i.e. teaching and learning (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008; Fullan 2010; Robinson 2010); and lastly, they need to be aware of and responsive to the broader context, beyond the school walls, within which they operate (Williams 2008; Fullan 2010). These five components of successful leadership will guide the analysis of qualitative data collected as part of the *Sustainable Whole School Renewal and Innovation (SWSRI) Pilot Project*. The analysis will explore the complexity of principals' work within a primary and a secondary school setting during a process of school reform focused on a whole school long-term renewal process.

The Sustainable Whole School Renewal and Innovation Pilot Project

The purpose of the *SWSRI Pilot Project* was to demonstrate the viability of implementing an intensive evidence-based, whole school innovation programme and was based on the *Schooling by Design* framework (Wiggins and McTighe 2007). This framework includes most of the elements identified as essential for successful educational innovation. It is focused on facilitating student understanding, giving teachers a key role in the innovation process, examining student data, setting goals appropriate for the school and sustaining the innovation over a long period of time. The SWSRI project was guided by the following research questions:

- (1) Are the participating schools able to develop/improve, use an effective knowledge management and craft a workable school improvement plan with measurable benchmarks?
- (2) Can design features that support effective scale-up to other schools be identified?
- (3) To what extent, if any, does this innovation strengthen the capacity of primary and secondary schools to improve the quality of teaching and learning?
- (4) Can evidence be found of greater teacher capacity, organisational and cultural change, and better alignment with the needs of the students and the curriculum in ways consistent with current educational research findings in school reform and professional learning?
- (5) Can design features that support effective school reform be identified and assessed using the Schooling by Design model?

Working as facilitators, and using the principles of backward design, the research team encouraged teachers in the participating schools to define a vision of where they wanted the school to be in five years' time, based on their school's mission and goals. Teachers developed a realistic assessment of the school in the present by analysing student achievement data from tests and other forms of assessment and by examining other aspects of the school environment. They set short-term goals to overcome the difference between their vision and the actual situation. Following Carr and Kemmis's model (1986), teachers, guided by the researchers, engaged in a self-reflective process of action research, setting a short-term goal and research questions and planning steps to reach the goal. The whole teaching staff engaged in initiating action, evaluating the process of change and planning a second cycle of research.

The context of the study: school renewal in Australia

The *SWSRI Project* commenced just as the Rudd/Gillard Government's Education Revolution (ER) was being implemented in Australian schools (Gillard 2009a; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2010a). The purpose of the ER was to ensure that students are adequately prepared to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century (Gillard 2009b). This purpose is aligned with the goal of the Melbourne Declaration (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2008, 7–8) for all students in Australian schools to become 'successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens'. The ER introduced multiple reforms to schools in rapid succession, including the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), technological advances such as SmartBoards and laptops for senior students, a national curriculum, and national standardisation of teacher registration and accreditation (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2010a, 2010b). These fast-paced reforms focused teachers' attention on short-term improvements in students' standardised test results, and the need to manage immediate concerns dictated by government policy. The result was that teachers were likely to be suffering from 'innovation overload', experiencing change-related chaos (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009, 2509), and, with insufficient time for reflection, they would be unable to see beyond the next innovation or new policy directive. In this context, it became difficult for teachers to take the long-term perspective

necessary to sustain educational innovation. Such an evolving context reinforces the need for effective leadership as any one of the multitude of changes occurring concurrently could act to derail progress towards long-term goals. More recently, there are moves to decentralise decision-making in schools by allowing principals greater autonomy in terms of budgets and expenditure (DEEWR 2012). This trend towards greater empowerment of principals heightens the need for the development of a better understanding of the drivers of change in schools and the characteristics required of those in leadership positions.

Sample and method

The schools were selected in consultation with the regional School Education Development Officer. Selection criteria included stable, motivated and energetic school leadership; stable, dynamic school staff; willingness to devote attention and time; and having a change orientation. The research team worked with the schools from mid-2009 to the end of 2011. Each school set up a steering committee for the project to collect and review relevant school data, set long-term normative goals, backward plan to set benchmarks for attaining these goals, design action research cycles to meet short-term goals, and review and revise the innovation in an iterative manner through the cycles of action research. Meetings of the steering committees were recorded and minutes were taken. Significant conversations in the meetings were transcribed. In September–October 2011, interviews were conducted in each school to assist in the evaluation of the project. At the high school, the principal, one participating teacher, three non-participating teachers and one parent were interviewed. At the primary school, the principal, one participating teacher, two non-participating teachers and one parent were interviewed. These semi-structured interviews were recorded and partial transcriptions were made. The minutes and transcriptions, along with other relevant documents, such as action research plans, were loaded into *QSR NVivo 9* and were coded.

The role of the principal

In this section, we draw on data collected as part of the SWSRI pilot project, focusing on the role of the two principals and the ways in which they demonstrate the characteristics and actions of effective leaders as described by the research literature. We will consider the five themes identified in turn, although it should be recognised that there is considerable interdependence and overlap between them.

The development of a shared vision

One of the actions identified as important for effective leaders is to enable the development of a shared vision and associated goals for the school as a whole. This notion fits well with the *modus operandi* of the SWSRI project, which was to use the process of ‘backward mapping’ from a long-term goal in order to provide direction and a sense of purpose over time. As such, the principals’ first task in the project was to develop, in consultation with their staff, a suitable long-term goal to guide their actions in the medium- and short-term. This process proved to be a surprisingly

difficult task. In the case of the primary school, it took the project steering committee 12 months and 10 meetings to achieve their goal ‘to build a culture of success based on our vision of the ideal graduate, in order to better aid transition from primary to high school’. The protracted nature of the goal setting process was due in part to the need for the vision to be a *shared* one. As one of the staff on the committee commented:

But I think, even the way it is delivered . . . it hasn’t been [the principal] saying, right, we are doing this, this and this. It’s been a collaboration. What do you think about this? Let’s have a look at it. Do you want to try it? Go away, have a think, come back, let’s talk about it. (Primary steering committee teacher)

Another teacher in the school also expressed the value in having goals that are created organically rather than simply implementing goals set via a ‘top down’ approach:

I don’t think that making goals and having a goal just for the sake of having a goal is – I think that’s a bit pointless, but I think if the goal is something that we’ve identified as a staff, have identified as a real need, then yeah, I definitely see the value in that, absolutely. (Primary school teacher)

A similarly prolonged process took place in the secondary school as they worked on setting a common long-term goal. After nine months and nine meetings of their steering committee, they arrived at the goal ‘to make [this school] the school of choice’, that is, the school that parents want their children to attend after they leave primary school. Interestingly, this goal was suggested by the secondary school principal in the first meeting; however, it took nine more months for agreement to be achieved. Despite what could be seen as wasted time, the principal explained:

. . . people tell me it’s a lot to do with my leadership. But it’s a lot to do with my belief that if you have people on board and going in the same path, you’ve got to give them the respect and the opportunity, and allow them to be involved in all the processes and have that openness and transparency, and that’s something I really, I believe I’ve done pretty well . . . Yes, something I’ve consciously worked at. (Secondary school principal)

As the project progressed, the primary and secondary schoolteachers began to communicate with each other in more significant ways than had previously occurred. They visited each other’s schools and observed lessons, which led to significant conversations about teaching and learning, specifically in relation to mathematics. As time progressed, the teachers in both schools began to talk about shared goals in terms of teaching approaches that could be employed to provide better outcomes for students:

Getting out to the partner primary schools has been a really positive link . . . I think it’s been instrumental. (secondary school principal)

For me the extra interaction and communication between myself, our school and the high school have been invaluable, absolutely surpassed any expectations I actually had . . . The communication with the high school and those networks with people that are now working not just down there and up here, but together to improve student learning outcomes. (Primary school Year 6 teacher)

The benefits of all staff in the primary school working towards a shared goal were also recognised by a parent representative interviewed as part of the project:

I think the staff are working quite cohesively now over the last couple of years as well, they seem to be communicating a lot better, and they're on the same page, and they have, you know, common goals and they're working towards the same direction . . . and I think that's good . . . Earlier on they were a bit sort of working towards different things. (Primary school parent)

The experiences within the two school settings examined in this study exemplify the difficulties involved in developing shared goals; however, the case studies also articulate clearly the benefits of persisting with the process.

Social intelligence and the development of relational trust

The setting of a shared vision in each school was the starting point for the project and clearly, arriving at a consensus was a time-consuming process involving on-going communication between the principals and their staff. The successful setting of the long-term goal was achieved in both schools only after all participants were allowed the time needed to feel included in the process. The principals, therefore, needed to display a great sense of trust in their staff, demonstrating a high degree of social intelligence, which is recognised in the literature as being a key characteristic of effective leaders. The secondary school principal demonstrates that she recognises the value of having trusting relationships with staff in the following statement:

They're more inclined to actually be honest and open in their opinions. They're able to, through focus groups, give feedback, good and bad, knowing that it will be listened to and it will be responded to and it will be acted upon, and I think that's probably the most important part of it. (Secondary school principal)

Equally, the staff in the primary school recognised and appreciated this characteristic in their principal:

She's [the principal] very fair like that. She'll make sure that we get a chance to give her feedback about what we would like to do, so I think maybe the fact that it hasn't been sort of shoved up people's nose has given them the opportunity to give it a try. (Steering committee teacher)

One primary schoolteacher emphasised that the changes in the school were a direct result of the principal's open and inclusive communication style. The teacher was asked by the interviewer to comment on how the principal went about making the changes happen:

Oh, through discussions, staff meetings, always asking staff for their input and taking it all on board and giving us feedback and asking us personally . . . it's been so nice to be treated as a professional and, sitting down, 'You're not having a good day. What's the problem?' You can always go and see [her] whenever. (Primary school teacher)

The case studies reveal that the building of social cohesion and trust is a key factor in ensuring that staff are committed to working towards shared goals and also that on-going effort is required to maintain the relationships over time.

Flexibility to solve complex problems

Despite operating in often vastly dissimilar contexts, schools are usually remarkably similar in terms of their operational structure. However, there is evidence in the literature that effective leaders do question existing organisational structures, particularly when those structures are hampering progress towards larger goals. This willingness to step outside existing structures in order to solve difficult problems demonstrates a key characteristic of exceptional leaders. The inherent tension between performance measures such as NAPLAN testing and general improvement in day-to-day teaching strategies, particularly in the subject of mathematics, proved to be a difficult problem for both the primary and the secondary principals.

In the secondary school, the principal took the approach of collecting and using data to challenge existing assumptions that staff held about their students and mathematics. She managed to provoke a change in the culture of the maths staff as teachers engaged in conversations about students' attitudes to maths, conducted a survey of their own students' attitudes to maths and participated in exchange visits with primary schoolteachers to observe maths lessons. Maths teachers reviewed the survey results from their own classes and were surprised by the finding that the majority of students know that maths is important and it is important to do well in maths. The principal commented that this finding had been 'a little bit confronting' for some of the 'old guards' on the maths staff, who had previously believed that students at the school did not want to achieve and had used this as 'an excuse in the past not to push the kids'. This led teachers to engage in further conversations about maths pedagogy.

To provide further evidence to support their reform attempts, both principals allowed the research team to assist with a detailed analysis of their NAPLAN test results. Analysis of NAPLAN data gave the schools an external perspective on their data, helped to identify areas of need that became a starting point at the beginning of the next year and assisted in further planning. The appreciation of the schools for this assistance was expressed by the primary school principal:

It was good for someone having a look in at it externally, because we put all sorts of ifs and buts because we know the kids. So externally it was really good to have that, and the staff enjoyed that. (Primary school principal)

This willingness to seek out multiple sources of evidence for consideration by the staff indicated that both principals were prepared to recognise the complexity of the issues that confront them and to seek external help if available. Teachers were also recognising the benefits of seeking out data to assist with decision-making:

The changes that I've seen in the school over the past two years are a particular awareness of data driven material. There's been an increase in interest in that data driven material and the school itself has actually chosen to use the information that is gathered to make small improvements around the school itself. (Secondary school teacher)

Both principals also demonstrated flexibility in varying from their original plans in order to incorporate new ideas that arose during the process. The secondary school principal spoke of the project as having 'a life of its own' and 'actually taking courses

that we would never have predicted', and she was happy to adopt a suggestion made by the maths head teacher about modelling a maths lesson at the primary school. The primary school principal also fitted in new strategies in addition to those in the initial plan.

Leadership of teaching and learning

Although principals are generally not involved directly in classroom teaching, their significant impact on classroom practices within schools is well documented (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008). The literature on effective leadership for schools identifies that principals should maintain a leadership role in teaching and learning, positioning themselves as learners alongside their staff.

The secondary school principal found a change in culture beginning to occur in particular faculties:

There seems to be a lot more energy in the maths faculty. There are a lot more conversations about how you are doing things than there have been for a very long time before...which can only have a positive impact on the kids. (Secondary school principal)

Indeed, these conversations were being recognised by the maths staff in a positive way:

We're doing a lot. We sit around and discuss things quite a bit in our faculty. 'I've got a problem with this. How do I better teach this to my students at this particular level?' I've got to say, the people in our faculty are quite supportive and quite willing to discuss different ways of doing things. (Secondary school maths teacher)

In the primary school, the principal explained that all of the major changes that had occurred were, in her opinion, centred on teaching and learning issues, indicating a strong and clear focus on these problems throughout the project. She identified the major changes as follows:

teaching and learning, the pedagogy; scope and sequence, like follow-through, so that everyone knows what everyone else is doing; consistent teacher judgement days, where teachers are working together to look at kids within a grade to look at how they're going and where they fit, and what's been missed out on what we need to catch up on; whole school assessment strategies K-6 and tracking and monitoring student progression; and working with the high school. (Primary school principal)

This consistent focus had resulted in more confident staff and more engaged students according to the primary school principal.

Engagement with wider community

Schools are vibrant microcosms of the communities in which they are situated but principals, who are often overwhelmed by the minutiae of necessary daily decisions, do not always have the time to foster links outside of the school. Inevitably, there are times when interactions with the local, and increasingly global, community are

required and the literature points to these interactions as being indicative of effective leadership. The secondary school principal recognised the value of community engagement as an unpredicted outcome of the change process within the school:

The results that we are achieving is hastening a lot of positive talk within the community and there is a real positive vibe. I mean, at the end of last term I was actually requested by the regional executive to do a presentation about what was going on at [our school] because our results across the board were just so solid, and they had actually acknowledged the change that had actually occurred in the school. And that came totally out of left field and it was a really positive thing to be involved in. (Secondary school principal)

In addition to being recognised by the regional education office, the principal had also been surprised that the positive changes in the school were being spruiked by students out in the community:

... kids from our school are actually talking the school up in the community, which, you know, that's a gain. That's positive, because most kids would talk negatively about their school, but if they're getting recommendations from kids that this is a good school to be at, I think we've done incredibly. (Secondary school principal)

Also, the secondary school principal made active moves to link the students with the wider world of work through local community links:

We're part of the local business community now. We've joined the Chamber of Commerce and had conversations about how we can support each other with our career and transition projects and having our kids out in the community more. (Secondary school principal)

The world beyond the school walls was also recognised as impacting on the schools in terms of the technology used in teaching and learning programmes. A parent at the secondary school recognised the importance of the role that the principal played in recognising and acting on developments outside of the school:

I think [name], the principal. She is really trying to bring the school up to date and trying to bring the work in. I think it's the kids demanding it too. There is a force of pressure of the kids going, 'Hey, why aren't you teaching us that way? Hey, our friends are learning that way.' But I think [the principal's] also aware of what's also going on outside, like the kids are. So I think that's where the biggest change is. The kids have a voice, and [the principal] is listening to them and she's trying to bring the changes in ... (Secondary school parent)

In this way, the principal was recognising and validating the lives that the students have outside of the educational institution and thereby, valuing the knowledge and experience that the students gain elsewhere.

Implications for educational leaders

This paper examines how two principals involved in leading change in an educational context exhibited various characteristics of effective leaders. We identified five significant characteristics that have been acknowledged in multiple studies as being

important for transformational leadership: the need to develop a shared goal or vision for the school; the development of relational trust with staff; the need to be able to solve complex problems; a clear focus on teaching and learning; and a willingness to engage with the wider community. Of these, we found ample evidence that both principals worked actively to pursue the development of a long-term goal, inclusive of their staff, albeit encouraged and assisted by the research team in this process. However, in both cases, this process took considerable time and required the principals' patience as the staff worked through various options. Ultimately, the process in both schools was successful in arriving at a shared goal; however, the length of the consultation process provides a beneficial lesson for any leaders wishing to make change quickly. Given the pace of educational policy change and the increasing pace of change in society in recent times, this tension between facilitating change in an inclusive manner and imposing top-down measures is likely to continue.

The two principals also made considerable efforts to build constructive and trusting relationships with their staff. In part, the extended time taken during the goal setting process in each school was reflective of the respect that the leaders demonstrated towards their staff. Both leaders demonstrated effective communication styles that encouraged staff to feel invited to participate and provide input, knowing that it would be welcomed and considered in the process.

The process of leading and managing schools in the current era is becoming more complex. In addition to managing the daily mechanics involved with organising a large number of children and staff, there are national educational policy changes that are demanding attention. Balancing the demands of public accountability on national tests with the educational needs of all students is a problematic balancing act for most educational leaders. The two principals in this study demonstrated a readiness to engage with multiple sources of data in order to make informed decisions wherever possible, revealing an awareness that simple solutions are not sufficient for effective decision-making.

Despite much of their time being consumed by 'non-teaching' activities such as behaviour management and organisational matters, both principals were able to maintain a clear focus on issues related to the improvement of teaching and learning, although this often occurred in a tangential manner. The leaders focused on enabling their staff to focus on teaching and learning by providing a supportive structure, guided in part by the research team. As a result, the teachers became self-motivated agents of change, primarily focused on improving student learning outcomes.

There was also considerable evidence that the two principals were aware of the potential gains to be made through engagement with the wider community within which their schools were situated. There were multiple levels involved here, from the immediate local community, through to regional office interactions and meaningful engagement with national educational policy developments and more broadly, significant technological changes in society.

Although focused on long-term planning over a five-year period, this research project examined only the first two years of the reform process. In these two years, the school leaders and teachers developed long- and short-term goals and began the implementation process towards these goals. Despite the subsequent withdrawal of the research team, there was evidence that the project would lead to sustainable change over a longer time period. Both the primary and the high school principals expressed a desire to continue to build on the gains made throughout the project:

Getting out to the partner primary schools has been a really positive link, and people are looking at how we can build on that in the future, to maintain it, to continue it. (High school principal)

Continuation of working with the high school. I'd like to see it not just with maths, but across other areas... So I can see that the stuff that we've started is spilling out to... the other schools, so people are wanting to come on board. (Primary school principal)

There was also evidence that the planning process initiated in conjunction with the research team had become embedded within the schools as an important contributory component necessary for the continuation of the change process:

I think even, you know, in the future, project or no project, those communication links will be further developed with those teachers and myself and our committee up here, which is only going to mean better outcomes for our students and bridging that transition gap from Year 6 to Year 7, which was definitely a goal for us at this end. (Primary school Year 6 teacher)

This study has focused on the process of long-term change from the perspective of the school leaders and teachers involved in the process. We have not measured the resulting impact on student achievement; however, there were encouraging signs that the teachers and principals involved placed student learning outcomes at the centre of their reform efforts and were determined to continue the change process:

We both have the same goal and the same aim, i.e. the betterment of our students and their learning and supporting other students, which we're talking a lot more than what we were... (Primary school Year 6 teacher)

It appeared that the existence of a clear common purpose between high school and primary schoolteachers, with a focus on improved student learning outcomes, had energised the reform efforts occurring in each school, lending momentum to the continuation of the collaborative process:

It would have to be the communication with the high school and those networks with people that are now working not just down there and up here, but together to improve student learning outcomes. (Primary school Year 6 teacher)

If we are to understand how school leaders can best act to improve student learning then more long-term research is needed. This study demonstrates that the pace of authentic school reform can be frustratingly slow and that progress towards long-term goals can be sidetracked in response to changing government policies or community concerns (Albright, Clement, and Holmes 2012). Within this context, school leaders must be able to maintain a clear focus on long-term goals, in order to manage the competing demands, while encouraging their staff to do the same. This is not an easy task.

The two case studies demonstrate the multi-faceted, yet interrelated complexity of principals' work in a reform environment within a primary and a secondary school setting. Evidence emerged that both principals were able to exhibit all five of the characteristics for effective change leadership identified in the literature, but that there were often tensions between these features. For example, the development of

relational trust with staff was seen to be an essential component of the progress made in both schools; however, the time taken to achieve meaningful levels of trust and therefore to build social capital within both schools was often at odds with the principals' desire to effect change in a reasonable timeframe. Being responsive to a rapidly changing external policy environment, for example, does not always sit comfortably with principals' desire to avoid 'top down' decision-making. In addition, many of the external policy changes, for example, the introduction of publicly available high stakes test data, can be at odds with efforts to reform teaching and learning programmes. Balancing such competing demands, therefore, will continue to be a key challenge for transformational leaders. However, by being aware of these tensions, and by paying attention to the important underlying principles for effecting change, the leaders of the future may be better placed to find solutions to the difficult problems that they will inevitably face.

Notes on contributors

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James Albright is the Director of the Educational Research Institute, Newcastle (ERIN). His research interests include English language arts, school reform and equity. He is currently a chief investigator on a study of the roll out of the Australian Curriculum in English and Math and a large scale longitudinal study of factors related to children's aspirations.

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