

Moving from success to sustainability: A case study in principal leadership

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Introduction

This paper reports the finding from a longitudinal case study of successful school principalship. It reports one of three case studies where the researchers have revisited the school after a period of four years. All three authors of this paper were involved in the initial study in 2004 and the follow-up study in 2008. The paper outlines the findings from the original investigation and describes the changes and outcomes since the initial study. It shows how the principal was able to sustain success despite new challenges and this success relied on leadership broadly conceived.

Background

This paper describes a Victorian observational case study that is part of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP). The ISSPP was launched in February of 2001. The initial intent of the project was to identify the knowledge, skills and dispositions which successful school principals use for implementing leadership practices across a range of successful schools in different countries. Success was determined on three variables: improving performance at an exceptional rate based on statewide test and examination results; a positive school inspection report (where available); acknowledgement by peers (through the local, regional and national networks of professional associations) that the principal was a successful leader. The project has included multiple-perspective case studies of over 70 successful schools, and surveys of principals in six countries. The project is now moving into a phase where the researchers are returning to the original case study principals to see whether success has been sustained and the factors that have led to the current level of success. The ISSPP has produced a book (Leithwood & Day, 2007a), two special journal issues (*Journal of Educational Administration*, 43(6), 2005; *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 35(3), 2007), and numerous individual papers (for example: Drysdale, 2008; Gurr, 2008; Gurr & Drysdale, 2007; Gurr, Drysdale, Di Natale, Ford, Hardy & Swann, 2003; Gurr, Drysdale & Mulford, 2005, 2006; Gurr, Drysdale, Swann, Doherty, Ford & Goode, 2006; Raihani & Gurr, 2006).

Findings from the ISSPP

In reviewing the school leadership literature, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins (2006) provide a concise and useful definition. School leadership involves:

- Building vision and setting direction.
- Understanding and developing people.
- Redesigning the organisation.
- Managing the teaching and learning program.

In analysing the case studies across the countries in the ISSPP, Leithwood and Day (2007b, p. 189) found evidence for additional practices to be added to those of Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins (2006):

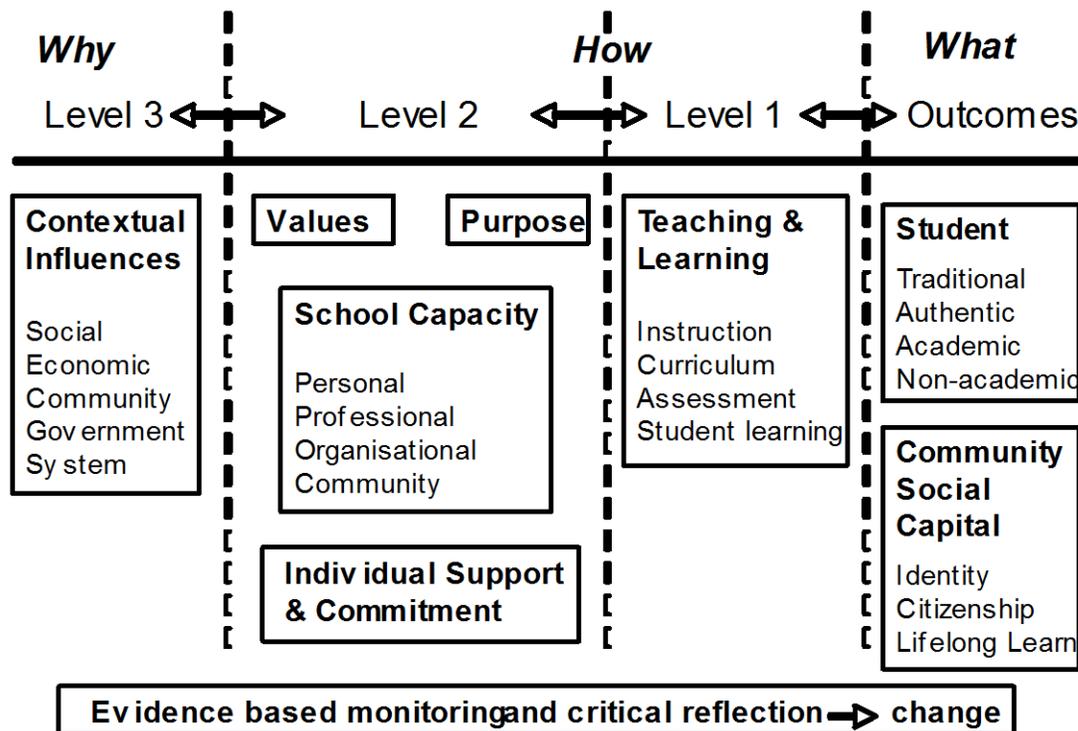
In the Direction-setting category, these additional practices include a version of *problem solving* [analyses context, clarifies problems that need to be addressed; establishes improvement plan] (from research in four countries), as well as *articulating a set of core values* (identified in the research of two countries). As part of the Developing People category, our studies recommend adding *trust building* and *being visible in the school* to the core set of successful leadership practices. *Building a safe and secure environment* has been added to the Redesigning the Organization category of successful leadership practices. And to Managing the Instructional Program, our evidence suggests adding *introducing productive forms of instruction to staff*. The most significant addition to the original set of core leadership practices is a broad category we have labelled Coalition Building...Specific initiatives undertaken by our successful principals to build coalitions entailed making connections with, and influencing, agencies and groups external to the school (government, professional groups, community groups and district staff).

These additional practices indicate that, in addition to core leadership practices, the principals in the ISSPP were: concerned about ensuring there was a safe environment (in some troubled schools this was the first priority); had clearly articulated core values (the strength and clarity of these values was a standout feature of all of the Australian principals); constructed context-sensitive improvement plans; established trust (whilst the Australian principals varied from gregarious extroverts, to those more reserved and quiet, they were all well-liked, highly regarded and trusted); ensured they were visible in the school (the time during the school day was often protected and devoted to 'being there' for the school community); and, influenced the instructional program (either directly as John Fleming has done (Fleming & Kleinhenz, 2007; Gurr, 2008), or, more often, indirectly). Importantly they were also good at working with the broader context through the building of productive coalitions. This was not necessarily an overtly political activity, as it was more related to the level of enthusiasm of the principals (they are always looking for new initiatives, new opportunities), and to their desire to provide opportunities for the students.

Gurr, Drysdale and Mulford (2006) constructed a model derived from the 14 Australian case studies (nine Victorian and five Tasmanian) which is presented in Figure

1. In this model, principals exert an influence on student outcomes (broadly conceived) through a focus on teaching and learning which is driven by their own values and vision, an agreed school vision, elements of transformational leadership, and increasing school capacity, across four dimensions (personal, professional, organisational, and community), taking into account and working within the school context, and using evidence-based monitoring, and critical reflection to lead to change and transformation.

Figure 1: Australian Model of Successful Principal Leadership



This model provides several conceptual frameworks to allow principals to locate their work. It indicates that they can impact both directly and indirectly on student learning, but that mostly the impact is indirect. All the areas of principal leadership highlighted in this paper are either explicitly mentioned or implied. An interesting aspect of this model is that it can be applied to those school personnel holding other leadership positions, especially those in coordinating roles (White, 2000, 2001). For example, there are 16 elements that describe the school capacity section, and these are relevant for anyone who has a supervisory role – if a school leader wants to exercise leadership, an important aspect is helping to develop these capacities in those the school leader works with.

Methodology

In this case study, three researchers were involved with the school over a three-week period, spending about ten days conducting interviews, collecting appropriate documents, and observing the school principal and the life of the school. The main methods used to collect data were:

- Individual interviews with the principal (two interviews), assistant principal, curriculum coordinator, six other teachers (2 previously interviewed, 2 long-serving at the school, 1 experienced teacher recently appointed to the school, 1 newly qualified teacher recently appointed to the school), school council president, and school council parent member,
- Group interviews with parents (2 groups of 5-8) and students (2 groups of 5-8);
- Observation of the work of the school principal and aspects of the life of the school;
- Collection of documents to confirm the success of the school and to inform the observational and interview data.

Individual and group interviews used a semi-structured interview schedule focused on three broad questions:

1. Can you tell me about the changes to the school that have occurred since we were previously at the school?
2. Can you tell me about how your leadership (the principal's leadership) has developed over this time?
3. The evidence presented to us indicates that the school has remained successful. To what do you attribute this?

Observation of key school events (leadership team meetings, staff assemblies, whole-school assemblies, sport activities, classrooms in action, etc) were used to verify views expressed in the interviews about the principal's leadership behaviour, and the relationships, processes and practices of the school. Events observed were chosen by the researchers in consultation with the principal and the other interviewees. Depending on the event, one or more researchers were involved and events video taped. The researchers used field notes and a reflective journal to record observations and responses to events. Debriefing amongst the researchers and/or with the principal occurred at the end of each observation day.

In addition to interview and observational data, relevant documents were collected such as school development plans, school prospectuses, school review reports, newsletters and examples of media coverage. These sources were used to contextualise the empirical data and to enhance trustworthiness.

Findings

School Profile

Morang South Primary School is a co-educational government primary school that was first established as a rural school in 1877. It is situated some 23 kilometres north of the Melbourne CBD. The school caters for children from Preparatory Year to Year 6 with an age range between 5 to 12 years. The school moved to a new site in 1996 to cope with the rapidly developing growth corridor. At the time of the initial study the school enrolment had grown from 322 in 1999 to 583 in 2004. There was 52 staff, including 36 teachers and various support staff.

Principal Profile

The Principal, Jan Shrimpton, has been working in the Department of Education for 40 years and has been a principal for seventeen years. She first took up the role of principal in 1990 and in 1993 successfully initiated and merged two primary schools. She remained principal at the merged school until term three 1998 when she was seconded as a Senior Education Officer in the Northern Regional Office of the Victorian Department of Education and Training. At the request of the Regional Director she took up an acting principal position at Morang South Primary in term four of that year. When the position was advertised the following year, she applied, was successful, and has been in the substantive position since then.

Background: Previous findings

The initial case study was conducted in 2004. The school was identified as a turn-around school as a result of a school review conducted in 2003. Prior to the current principal's appointment in late 1999 the school had experienced considerable decline in performance, especially between 1995 and 1999. Evidence of the school's performance was noted in the 1997 School Triennial Review (page 6):

The analysis of student learning at Morang South highlights that many children are working below the expected CSF levels in English and Mathematics.

A further decline in performance between 1997 and 1999 was noted in the 2000 School Triennial Review. A major reason for the poor results was explained by the poor school culture that had developed with this most obvious in conflict between the principal, teachers and parents. Much of the conflict was attributed to the school's move to a new site and the principal's management style.

From the time Jan Shrimpton was appointed principal in late 1999, the school's performance improved on a number of measures. The Triennial Review report for (2000: 2) showed that:

It is evident that the school has made a significant recovery since 1998 and the new leadership team is well placed to tackle the curriculum issues that the school must address over the next Charter period.

During our study we found evidence of improved student performance in Mathematics and English, staff opinion, parent opinion, resource management, school image, and principal reputation and esteem among peers and school community. This was supported by the 2003 School Review which said:

Morang South Primary Schools is to be congratulated on continuing its improvement over the triennium. The school provides a stimulating and dynamic curriculum that successfully caters for the needs of the school community. Improvement in all aspects of the school is commendable. (School Triennial Review, 2003: 2)

The school identified its success on a range of criteria. In addition to improved performance in literacy and numeracy the school noted: development of a clearly defined

philosophy; collaborative, happy, committed staff; positive and rich learning environment for the children; community support; and a sound reputation in the community.

The main reason for success was reported to be the principal's positive contribution. She described her greatest achievement as having the whole community working with her. From our analysis of the data we identified four core themes that appeared to account for her success – leadership style, personal philosophy and values, building relationships and personal characteristics. In terms of her leadership style she was described as a positive role model, inspirational, and empathetic. Her style was consultative and conciliatory. Her personal philosophy was centred on the whole child and not just academic results.

I have had a long and enduring commitment to all children receiving the best possible range of educational experiences, opportunities to succeed and to reaching their full potential (Principal).

She had introduced the notion of the school moving from a 'rules based' approach to a 'values based' approach. Building positive relationships was a corner stone of her approach to improving teacher morale and commitment, and establishing community support. Her personal characteristics included integrity, high energy, sensitivity, enthusiasm, and persistence.

There is nothing you cannot achieve and fix if you are persistent, consistent and tenacious (Principal).

Changes since the last visit

During our return visit in 2008 we were interested to see what changes had occurred and to what extent the school was able to sustain its performance. The following changes were noted:

1. The school enrolment had declined from a high of 611 students in 2005 to 500 students in 2008. This resulted in the need to downsize staff. Changes in enrolments were largely due to the establishment of two new schools in the area designed to cope with the growth in population.
2. The staff profile was older and many of the younger teachers had moved for promotion, or their contact had not been renewed because of a decline in student enrolments.
3. The school demographics was said to have changed to the point that behavioural problems were more pronounced due to more students coming from challenging family backgrounds.
4. Major Education Department initiatives imposed on the school included implementing a new curriculum framework, new assessment and reporting practices, and greater accountability procedures, and other initiatives, had put increased pressure on staff and school resources.
4. At the time of the research the principal announced her retirement after ten years as principal.

Ability to maintain or improve performance.

In the four years since the initial research there was sufficient evidence to indicate that the school had maintained its overall performance. The 2007 School Review report (2007:4) noted in the executive summary:

It is a good, successful school which aims to consistently provide high quality education and continuously improve.

The report listed successful attributes as a strong sense of purpose and community, high level of collegiality, strong leadership, and quality professional learning. It congratulated the school on its initiatives to improve student outcomes and improve the quality of school life through a focus on learning, social competencies, student leadership, citizenship, well-being, values development, and extra curricular activities.

School data across a range of areas supported this view. The School Level Report (assembled centrally from data supplied by schools) showed that the Early Years Literacy results remained well above state benchmarks, and results for English and Mathematics in the statewide testing program (AIM) in Year 3 and Year 5 showed a slight upward trend with results at or above state benchmarks. Student absence rates remained high but showed improvement, and parent opinion of key aspects of the school had improved on most items although general satisfaction showed a slight decline. One area where results were not sustained was staff opinion which declined in most variables but remained at very high levels nevertheless, and well above state benchmarks (declining from the 90th percentile compared to state results to the 70th percentile). The two areas that remained below expectations for teachers were student behaviour and student motivation. However the data indicated some very positive improvement with, for example, the 2008 records showing a decline in incidents with serious consequences from 481 in 2004 to 26 in 2007.

Reason for sustainability.

The interview and observational data collected from the return visit showed that the same four themes had emerged – leadership style, personal characteristics, relationship building, and personal philosophy and values. The data also showed the interventions and approaches used by the principal to try to improve performance. The themes demonstrated consistency with her focus on staff, parents and students.

Leadership Style

Jan noted that her style had not changed, although while she said she had not lost any of her patience, she had had to be tougher on some occasions. She described herself as not being afraid to address issues head-on, whilst remaining cogniscent of the welfare of all involved.

I will be tough if I need to be but I always try for a win/win (Principal).

She was observed to be influential and purposeful. Her style was open and invitational rather than confrontational. As one experienced teacher remarked:

*Even if you have done the wrong thing you feel like you are being congratulated.
(Experienced Teacher)*

Her approach to decision making was described as ‘collaborative’, ‘democratic’ and ‘consultative’. Key decisions were discussed in forums where issues could be openly raised by staff. Jan and her assistant principal, Julie, worked as a team. Julie had been

selected to the position because she was perceived to have complementary skills. Jan was the communicator who was able to articulate the vision and build relationships. Julie was the curriculum leader whose expertise was in teaching and learning.

Jan had developed a structure that promoted professional learning teams at each level, and she had empowered the teams to set their own goals and try new approaches.

We don't interfere with staff once they run with an idea (Principal)

Teachers were encouraged to be leaders at every level; yet both individuals and teams were held accountable for their performance. Interestingly, while she empowered staff she was also a 'hands on' leader. She frequently visited classrooms and provided support where possible. This supported was summed by the LOTE(Languages Other Than English) teacher who had recently requested a return to the classroom.

Last year to make the transition a smooth one she gave me planning time with the Year 5/6 team, provided me with opportunities to attend professional development, a general 'Hi how are you going?', coming into my classroom to see how I am going, giving me confidence to do a better job. The whole Year 5/6 team has been supportive.

Personal characteristics

Jan displayed a range of personal characteristics. A key characteristic was a strong sense of purpose and persistence. She outlined that it had taken her five years to turn the school around and that it was important not to let go of the momentum. She spoke about how it was being alert to events and stepping in before events escalated: *I try to avoid going into damage control (Principal).*

Jan had a positive self image: *I see myself as a successful leader (Principal).* Her success was based on teacher and community support and trust of the children. She was able to bring the community together and maintain the momentum. Her positive view was seen by staff as a role model to others that helped create confidence and a positive school climate. She also had numerous personal qualities that were admired and respected by staff. She was described as friendly and upbeat, creating good vibes, very loud and very funny, compassionate yet tough also. She was vigilant, self-contained as a person yet very open and a good listener. As one teacher said:

With Jan you can walk into her office and say anything that is on your mind - personal or work.

Finally she was seen as being an excellent communicator, totally trustworthy, diplomatic, and supportive.

Personal philosophy

Over the ten years as principal Jan's philosophy remained the same. She felt it was important to work holistically. While literacy and numeracy were important, so were the Arts, social competency, and tolerance of others. Her aim was to bring together the resources to create a community of life-long learners rather than being in the top five schools in the state.

The Educational Department focuses too much on literacy and numeracy, yet we know we do well by our students who do well at secondary school (Principal).

The Year 6 teacher reflected that Jan saw her work as a vocation rather than a career:

She works well and gets something positive out of even the most difficult student, parent or situation.

Another teacher outlined the philosophy by commenting that the school did not have the best student outcomes data, but the kids were motivated and happy and parents saw the school as successful and a happy place. She strongly believed that schools were for kids and this was demonstrated by her recruitment philosophy:

We recruit for attitude. First of all they must be passionate about teaching, love kids, and want to be part of a team, then skills come second (Principal).

Relationship Building

Jan was able to build relationships with a wide range of individuals and groups. She had demonstrated her capacity to do this when she turned the school around from a caustic environment to a harmonious and friendly atmosphere. She was able to reach out to the community and establish trust and confidence in the school. She talked about building community with open door policies, lots of meetings with parents, encouraging teachers to invite parents in the classroom, parenting programs and acknowledging parents' good work.

She was able to effectively manage staff, for example when she had to move one or two staff from the school it was win/win situation. Relief teachers provided feedback that they saw Jan was very welcoming and they preferred to teach in this school more than any other. She empowered young teachers and provided them with quality professional learning and leadership opportunities.

Above all she established trust.

When I was acting principal last term I felt comfortable in the role and Jan trusted me to do this (Assistant Principal).

She was approachable and students, teachers and parents felt they were welcomed to speak to her any time.

Interventions

As a leader Jan introduced a range of interventions that impacted directly on individuals and groups, and indirectly through programs and processes.

Key programs that made a positive impact included programs such as 'Quality in Schools', 'Restorative Practices', social competencies, and a clear code of conduct which emphasised communication rather than sanctions. The values program was particularly effective with specific values used consistently during the school day. One example observed was a small group of boys who had been in conflict in the school grounds and called to Jan's office. Her conversation with them began by referring to the school values. Each class had also established its own code of conduct with their own rules and consequences.

Another positive intervention was responsibility given to students, for example, students manned the front office at recess, took telephone calls and passed on messages. During one visit, one of the students came into the staffroom to remind Jan she was on yard duty!

There were also interventions which were more small scale but nevertheless had a positive impact. For example Jan acquired two King Charles Cavalier spaniels, one belonging to Jan, one to another teacher. These dogs had had a positive impact in a number of ways: they had a calming effect of distressed or badly behaved students, particularly Jan's dog Clipper who sat in a basket in her office; they provide support for students who had difficulty mixing as they were able to come to the office during breaks, put the dog on a lead and take him into the yard.

A number of extracurricular activities had been introduced. One of these was a choir. This was open to all students, regardless of whether or not they could sing. Jan trained this group each week. They performed regularly at a local old people's home.

In interview, Jan gave an example of a direct intervention with a staff member.

A young, excellent teacher who wanted to be friends with the students but who seemed to be heading for disaster... I sat down with her and was very directive about what she had to do....in her second year I set her up in a team teaching situation....she is now one of our best teachers.

Discussion

The school was able to maintain its overall performance and the principal's leadership continued to be a major driving force. The impact of her contribution was do with who she was – her personal characteristics, her leadership style and her personal philosophy and values that helped shape the culture of the school. Most particularly she had the ability to build strong and sound relationships with a wide audience. She was effective because she was able to model behaviour and act with integrity.

But it was not only who she was but what she did and how she did it. Her interventions included those identified in the literature (Leithwood and Day,2007b) such as building trust, making it a safe and secure place to work, building a positive school culture and providing opportunities for quality professional learning. She built appropriate structures that encouraged learning teams and built important connections and alliances within the community that helped provide support and resources for the school. Jan's leadership was identified as helping the school sustain its current level of performance and promote continuous improvement.

Conceptual Model

Jan's leadership was consistent with the conceptual framework of Figure 1. In terms of outcomes Jan placed equal emphasis on authentic outcomes such as social competencies, citizenship, and instilling in students a love of learning. She placed great emphasis on capacity building in areas such as professional learning, professional learning teams, acknowledging the individual talents of teachers. She attempted to develop a distributed leadership model by encouraging professional learning teams. There was continuous effort to engage the community and enhance the reputation of the school.

Jan and her assistant principal worked hand in glove. They had complementary skills. Jan noted that she did not have the curriculum knowledge necessary to make interventions in

the classroom: her assistant principal was seen as the curriculum leader and expert who had the capacity to make the necessary interventions. Jan's priority was people. She was best able to build a sense of community and cohesion. Julie was the curriculum leader challenged the staff with the latest methods and techniques. Her mantra was to raise standards.

From good to great

Jan's leadership was identified as helping the school sustain its current level of performance and promote continuous improvement. This was established by the multiple perspective interviews and analysis of performance data. The findings re-enforced the role of the principal in maintaining sustainable performance. However, we also wondered why the school had not gone to the next step in performance. Despite the ability of the school to maintain its current performance, results had plateaued. The school described itself as a 'good' but not a 'great' school. We had investigated how a principal had turned around the performance of a school and was able to maintain its performance over time. Given the context and challenges this was an admirable achievement. However, why had the school not succeeded in raising standards to the next level? Certainly the principal strongly believed in a holistic approach to learning rather than a focus only on literacy and numeracy. She also agreed that her philosophy was at odds with the current government emphasis on schools focussing strongly on improving literacy and numeracy outcomes. For Jan it was therefore time for her to 'move on', as she was not the person to drive that improvement. She cited a nearby school where results had dramatically improve but the principal 'had dragged staff kicking and screaming' to achieve these results and she would never do that.

The observational data largely confirmed what was found in the interview data but added another dimension and layer of analysis. The observations suggested that the school had 'country club' feel about it, and older teachers were content to stay because of this. An example of what might be termed complacency or contentment was when teachers were observed taking their time in returning to class from the staff room after morning, lunch and afternoon breaks. Some teachers were observed to be in the staff room before the first session and remain in the staff until the bell rang, and then wander to class with a cup of coffee. This was obviously a good place to work but it seemed that teachers had become also too comfortable. There was almost a feeling that staff was supported too much.

The findings in this instance suggest that to move the performance to a new level required a new or different leadership skill set and/or improvement strategies. With the inability to recruit new teachers because of a decline in enrolments, Jan had commented that she had found it difficult to get the older teachers to take on new leadership roles and accept greater responsibility. They were happy to remain in their current roles and they were reluctant to step-up for new challenges.

On announcing her retirement she said that it was time for the school to move in a new direction, and that she recognised that she had taken them as far as she could. It was time for a new leader to challenge and build on the current success and move the school to a new level. The finding from this case study showed how success had been sustained

through the contribution of a dedicated and skilful leader. It also suggests that to move an organisation to a new or different level may require a change in direction, a different leadership approach, or a new leadership skill set and/or improvement strategy. She was not prepared to change her philosophy for the new challenge that lay ahead for the school in order to move from 'good' to 'great'. This is the challenge of the new leader.

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