

PRINCIPALS REFLECTING ON THEIR LEADERSHIP LEARNING WITH AN HEURISTIC: A PILOT STUDY

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The purpose of this paper is to report on a small pilot study in which an heuristic was used to enable principals to reflect on the confidence they have in their existing leadership knowledge and how they might add to that knowledge in the future. The motivation for the study arose from a literature review of strategies for leadership development which showed up the lack of attention paid in research to principals' agency in the pursuit of their own learning. This contrasts starkly with the dominance in the literature of principals' reliance on education systems or authorities which, at present, make most decisions about principals' learning in leadership development programs. The piloting of the heuristic acts as a means of shifting the emphasis from system to self, thus empowering individuals to take more responsibility for their own future leadership learning needs.

Introduction

This paper reports on a small pilot study in which we trialled with principals in Australia and New Zealand, a tool called an heuristic. For the pilot, we augmented the original tool briefly described in earlier work by Clarke and Wildy (2011). The motivation for the study arose as a direct result of a review we carried out for the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. That review (Dempster, Lovett & Flückiger, 2011) examined research and scholarly writing on strategies for the professional learning of school leaders. As we completed the review, it became clear to us that all we had read referred to leadership learning opportunities or professional development programs conducted by government departments and public or private agencies. We could locate no studies in which the central feature was the construction of a professional leadership learning pathway or profile by individuals themselves. It seemed to us that professional development is consciously or unconsciously something 'done to' individuals by education systems or authorities.

Personal agency seems to be largely ignored in writing about leadership learning, yet we know that adult learners are "motivated by opportunities to address problems and create solutions that relate directly to their lives" (Hunzicher, 2010, p.177). This suggests to us that what is now needed, in addition to on-going system learning provisions, is a move away from system reliance to individuals able to make their own choices for learning in response to specific contextual needs. This paper highlights the potential value of an heuristic for supporting leaders to become more autonomous and agentic than they may have been in the past. From the outset though, we stress that such an heuristic should not be viewed as 'the' magic bullet but rather as a useful starting point for leaders to determine their own learning achievements to date and future needs around specific aspects of leadership.

To report on the pilot, we structure the paper in three parts. First, we provide some evidence of the claim that the literature is largely silent on the role individuals play and the responsibility (decisions about what they have done and what they need to do) they exercise in the pursuit of their own professional learning. Then we move on to outline the scope of the heuristic which we took through two iterations in this pilot research. We follow this by explaining the method we employed after which we present and analyse the data we obtained on the second of the iterations we used. We conclude with comments on how we plan to revise the instrument which we intend to carry forward in further work with school leaders in a study in which principals themselves take up the challenge of adjusting the tool to their own circumstances and needs.

Part 1. Motivation for the Pilot from the literature

We now turn to justifying why we believe leaders need to have more autonomy in decisions about their leadership learning based on our analysis of a number of country reports on leadership learning for the AITSL report. For example, we acknowledge the work of Pont, Nusche and Hopkins (2008) on the OECD report and Barber, Whelan and Clarke (2010) for the McKinsey and Company report both of which contain extensive country data on the provision of leadership learning.

However, before we do so, we need to argue that how we talk about leadership learning is problematic because it indicates who has responsibility for it and the approaches used. As Timperley (2011) argues there is a distinction to make between the terms ‘professional development’ and ‘professional learning’. She refers to ‘professional development’ as being the ‘sit and get’ approach to learning content where those with more knowledge attempt to upskill others because they know what others ought to know. On the other hand ‘professional learning’ is the term she uses to convey learner engagement with decisions regarding the what, how, why and when of learning. Despite these distinctions, Timperley is quick to argue it is not a question of either or, but rather that both are needed. She highlights these dual sources of learning by saying “...leaving teachers to it does not lead to transformational changes in practice either. Processes for active inquiry, learning and experimenting have to become teachers’ core business of thinking as a professional” (Timperley, 2011, p.xviii). Such skills are often learnt through professional development. Likewise Dempster (2001) refers to the need for a fine balance between system and individual needs so that they are complementary and therefore respectful of adults as learners with common and unique needs.

To this end access to a reflective tool, such as the one trialled for this paper, is one way to support individual leaders to take responsibility for their learning agendas. The appeal of an heuristic is its potential for helping leaders to identify established areas of confidence about leading self and others to highlight the knowledge and skills they have yet to acquire. In creating a knowledge inventory elaborating the heuristic, we caution against it being made so explicit and detailed that leaders continue to remain dependent on what others signal as being necessary knowledge and skills. Realising the power of professional learning (Timperley, 2011) is a phrase we think underpins the message that individuals can take responsibility for identifying their own needs and then planning how and when they might attend to them in the future.

Now we return to the country studies of leadership learning typified by the authors of the OECD and McKinsey reports referred to earlier. Their focus was on system driven leadership learning. We saw little evidence of personalised professional leadership learning being promoted in that literature. Instead what we encountered were numerous country responses to worldwide concerns about leadership supply and the need to create succession and talent development plans. These examined trend data with little reference to individual differences except for the acknowledgement of varying career needs of individual leaders. For example, the McKinsey Report (2010) gave an account of 8 countries’ system determined offerings in terms of content, timing, access and approach. All showed they were addressing succession concerns by providing programs for different categories of leader: aspiring, new, experienced and veteran. Some included particular features such as on-the-job mentoring support, goal setting, internships and development projects. These are examples of system initiated learning rather than opportunities designed by leaders taking responsibility for their own learning.

As we have argued elsewhere (Dempster, Lovett & Flückiger, in-press), standards and capability frameworks dominated the country reports we examined. Some examples include: the *National Standard for School Leaders from Australia*, the *Kiwi Leadership for Principals* framework from New Zealand, *The National Professional Qualification for Headship from England* and the *Ontario Leadership Capability Framework* from Canada. These examples emphasise on the kinds of skills and abilities that system authorities think school leaders require across a range of leadership domains. Moreover, we found similarities in these various frameworks which suggested dominance by systems

in controlling the nature and scope of school leadership learning agendas.

Despite this view, we acknowledge that standards frameworks offer potential benefits for leadership development. They can act as points of reference for those with responsibility for managing professional learning budgets and for making decisions about what professional development should be funded. They may also be useful reflective devices for teachers considering taking up new leadership roles. Likewise, they may assist employers to make judgements about staff appointments.

Two limitations in the use of standards frameworks are noted. The first relates to “restrictions on what is given prominence, who is being represented, and whose interests are being served along with how the frameworks may enable or constrain the qualities of individual leaders and their practices” (Dempster, Lovett & Flückiger, 2011, p.15). The problem is that the matters for inclusion within such frameworks are decided by employers and systems. While this is to be expected, the influence of employers’ interests on the choice of subject matter for leadership development needs to be challenged.

A second limitation of standards frameworks relates to a current understanding of what the demands and pressures of the future will be. The present does not necessarily provide a basis from which future leadership considerations can be planned. Therefore, frameworks must be open to adjustment or additions by individuals to compensate for the likely emphasis on system initiated demands for particular leadership learning. If this is to be done effectively, the question of balance arises. Leaders who think about their learning need to weigh up the knowledge and skills systems expect them to employ to perform the job with the transformative practices that can bring about change in their unique circumstances. In short, there is a need for balance between an individual’s personal learning needs with the normative requirements of the system. It is for this reason that we suggest there is an obligation to find ways to help leaders to determine what it is they need to change about themselves, why and how. This ultimately involves acknowledging what they know about issues in their settings, their capability to resolve them, and, if not resolved, how they will go about doing so. Such awareness of learning needs is decidedly context specific not system determined. This suggests another reason why a broad indicative tool may help leaders recognise their needs independent of others. Such a tool should indicate general domains of leadership work where further necessary learning relevant to a leader’s situation would be readily identified.

Part 2. The extended heuristic explained – its first iteration and what we learned from it.

In the first stage of the pilot we constructed and trialled the use of an instrument based on the heuristic outlined briefly in work by Clarke and Wildy (2011). The instrument (heuristic) consisted of twenty statements that we considered as key elements of a school leader’s knowledge inventory. These statements were organised around five focal points: people, place, pedagogy, system and self (see Table 1 as these statements are repeated there). We undertook this first trial to ensure that the items in the instrument (twenty statements about key knowledge elements and four statements about personal learning) made it clear to respondents what was being asked of them and to enable us to refine it before further implementation

A small group of principals was invited to use the heuristic and provide feedback on its design. Ten primary and secondary school principals (six Australians and four New Zealanders) agreed to do so. Before administering the heuristic, ethical clearance for the pilot was obtained through the usual university channels in Australia and New Zealand and permission to conduct the trial in metropolitan State schools was gained from Education Queensland). Information about the study, including issues of confidentiality and informed consent was distributed to participants by email. A copy of the paper resulting from the pilot was offered as a benefit to those who chose to participate in the trial.

Principals were asked to respond to each of the 20 statements about key knowledge elements by placing ticks (✓) in the accompanying four columns to indicate the scope of their leadership learning. By placing a tick in the first column, principals identified that they had already undertaken leadership

learning in relation to the knowledge element. A tick in the second column indicated that the opportunity for this learning had been arranged by their system (eg government, church, or independent sector governing body). The third column was divided into two so that principals could identify whether the learning had been undertaken formally (a course or program of study; organised professional development), or informally (eg conversation with a peer; learning on the job). A tick in the fourth column indicated that principals had not yet undertaken leadership learning in this area.

After completing the heuristic, principals were asked to respond to a series of open ended prompts seeking views about the efficacy of the instrument, suggestions for improvement and comments on the claim on which the tool was based. The three prompts were:

- Please comment about the items in the heuristic and any issues in its completion;
- What changes and or additions would you suggest?
- The claim is that the heuristic should help principals better understand important aspects of their leadership learning profile. What response would you have to this claim?

Principals' responses to the statements related to their leadership learning were collated by first aggregating ticks within columns. Then the patterns of individual and collective responses were analysed in conjunction with responses to the three prompts above. We learnt from this process, that the focal points and their elaboration as a content inventory drew little other than favourable comments. Principals wrote that the Heuristic was:

- easy to complete;
- a helpful reflective tool – pertinent to the current climate of leadership learning;
- a useful focus for self-assessment; and
- a good overview of leadership learning with content in “good sized chunks”.

In short, respondents seemed well able to understand the scope of leadership learning described in the twenty statements. That said, there were a number of comments suggesting that adjustments would be necessary to the four columns and the descriptors that related to the scope of leadership learning within them before a second trial. These adjustments included: removing double-barrelled statements (eg informal and formal learning in the same column); removing duplication between the columns (eg columns 1 and 3); and addressing a lack of clarity over the use of the phrase ‘learning arranged by my system’. We acted on these comments in producing the second version of the tool (see Table 1). We now move to present and discuss the method used and data gathered from the second trial.

Part 3. Method and Results

This part of the paper reports on the second trial of the heuristic (Version 2) and results obtained from it. Invitations to participate in the second trial were distributed to 14 newly appointed faith-based Independent primary school heads who were participating in an induction program. The term ‘heads’ is used typically in Australian independent schools, to describe those leading primary schools where there is a secondary school attached.

As in the first trial, information about the pilot, including a statement that ethical clearance had been gained to conduct the study, was provided to potential participants. Assurances of confidentiality and anonymity in relation to participants and data were included. A copy of the paper resulting from the pilot was again offered as a benefit to those who chose to participate.

Six primary school heads volunteered to participate in the second trial and subsequently completed Version 2 of the heuristic along with the open-ended questions that were included in the first trial. Table 1 shows Version 2 of the heuristic and provides the collated results from the six heads who completed it.

Table 1. Heuristic Version 2 results: Faith-based Independent School Principals (N=6)

Leadership focal point and knowledge inventory	I am confident in my leadership knowledge in this area ✓ or X	I plan to gain further leadership knowledge:			
		Through organised courses or workshops (online or face-to-face)	Through discussion with peers	Through Informal learning on the job	With a mentor or coach
Pedagogy					
1. knowledge of growth, learning and development across the lifespan	✓✓✓✓✓ x	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓
2. knowledge of effective strategies for teacher professional development	✓✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
3. knowledge of the rationale for and how to plan, coordinate, implement, monitor and evaluate teaching and learning	✓✓✓✓✓ x	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓
4. knowledge about how to gather data and how to conduct evidence-based professional conversations on teaching and learning	✓✓✓✓ xx	✓✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓✓✓
People					
5. knowledge of communication that enhances working relationships	✓✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓		✓✓	✓✓
6. knowledge of how to structure schools so that teachers, support personnel and others operate as learning communities	✓✓✓ xxx	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓
7. knowledge of how and when to distribute tasks to engage others in leadership	✓✓✓✓✓✓		✓✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓
8. knowledge of how to identify leadership talent and how to assist others to develop	✓✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓		✓✓✓✓✓
Place					
9. knowledge of international issues and their possible impact on practice	✓✓✓✓ xx	✓✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓
10. knowledge of national reforms, policies and programs and their school effects	✓✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓
11. knowledge of school context and knowing how to undertake a cultural audit	✓✓ xxxx	✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓		✓✓✓
12. knowledge of key conditions for learning and how to optimise them	✓✓✓✓✓ x	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓	✓
System					
13. knowledge of system mandated policy and procedures and matters where leaders' discretion can be exercised	✓✓✓✓✓ x	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓
14. knowledge of the specific curriculum and assessment requirements of the system	✓✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓
15. knowledge of a range of tactics to aid a leader's discretionary decision-making	✓✓✓✓ xx	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓
16. knowledge of networks to facilitate peer and supervisor relationships	✓✓✓✓✓ x	✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓✓
Self					
17. knowledge of my personal professional moral position	✓✓✓✓✓✓		✓✓	✓	✓✓✓✓
18. knowledge of professional ethics and my related personal values	✓✓✓✓✓✓			✓	✓✓✓✓
19. knowledge of the tensions between system compliance and personal preference in my leadership decisions	✓✓✓✓✓ x		✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓

20. knowledge of personal strengths and weaknesses in my educational leadership	✓✓✓✓✓✓	✓		✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓✓
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The left hand column of Table 1 shows four statements for each of the five focal points in the heuristic. These statements act as a starting point only for principals to consider their personal learning. The statements are aligned with five columns to the right, in which principals indicate their confidence in their leadership knowledge and how they plan to acquire further knowledge (whether through structured courses, discussion with peers, informally on the job or with a mentor or coach). In this second version of the heuristic, principals indicate whether they are confident or not in their leadership knowledge by inserting a tick (✓) or a cross (X) in the first column.

As in the first trial, principals' responses to the statements related to their leadership learning were collated by first aggregating ticks within columns (as shown in Table 1). Then the patterns of individual and collective responses were analysed in conjunction with responses to the three open-ended prompts above.

Results

The bulk of this section deals with the results of the trial of version 2. We follow this with the disclosure of changes suggested by respondents to the heuristic through its three versions.

Version 2 results

The aggregated data shown in Table 1 are discussed so that we can make judgments about the utility of the tool and possible changes which may help to improve its relevance to leadership learning. To structure the discussion, we travel across the table from left to right.

Column 1 which asked principals to indicate whether they are confident in their knowledge of each of the Heuristic's focal points shows that all respondents reported being confident in their knowledge of effective strategies for teacher professional development (Item 2), knowledge of teacher support structures, how to share leadership tasks, and how to identify and develop leadership talent (Items 5, 7 and 8). All respondents were also confident in their knowledge of national reforms and system curriculum and assessment requirements (Items 10 and 14). Against the focal point, 'Self', all reported confidence in their knowledge of personal moral, ethical and value positions as well as confidence in an understanding of their leadership strengths and weaknesses (Items 17, 18, 20).

Against this picture, half reported being confident in structuring schools as learning communities (Item 6), a third were not confident in their knowledge of evidence based conversations (Item 4), the impact of international issues on practice (Item 9) and tactics for discretionary decision making (Item 15). Least were confident in their knowledge of the school context and how to conduct a cultural audit (Item 11).

The data recorded in Column 2 refer to how heads acquired their leadership knowledge. Five of the six respondents reported having undertaken courses or workshops related to strategies for professional development (Item 2) and national reforms, policies and programs (Item 10). Two thirds reported participation in courses in planning, monitoring and evaluating teaching and learning (Item 3), data gathering and evidence based conversations (Item 4), how to structure schools (Item 6), the impact of international issues on practice (Item 9) and how to optimise the conditions for learning (Item 12).

There were four content areas in which no respondent reported engagement: (i) distributing or sharing leadership (Item 7); (ii) a personal professional moral position (Item 17); (iii) professional ethics and personal values (Item 18); and (iv) tensions between system compliance and personal decision preferences (Item 19).

The results in Column 3 show that two thirds of the respondents reported discussions with peers about

strategies for teacher professional development (Item 2); understanding the rationale for planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating teaching and learning (Item 3); sharing leadership with others (Item 7); discussing the schools context and cultural audits (Item 11); the conditions for learning (Item 12); and networks to facilitate peer and supervisor relationships (Item 16).

There were no reports of peer discussion on Item 5, communication to enhance working relationships, Item 18, professional ethics and personal values and Item 20, personal leadership strengths and weaknesses.

Column 4 shows few reports of learning informally on-the-job. The instrument asks for no reasons for this. It may be that there was some confusion over what constituted 'on-the-job' learning. Perhaps discussion with peers was seen as learning on-the-job as might learning with a mentor or coach. In addition, knowledge which has been learned informally might not be readily identifiable and this may have caused participants to avoid linking much of their learning with this column.

The results in Column 4 are in contrast with those from Column 5 where there is considerable activity on learning reported with a mentor or coach. Five out of six respondents reported learning in this way about: identifying talent and developing it (Item 8); and personal strengths and weaknesses (Item 20).

Two thirds reported mentor discussions about the rationale for planning, coordinating, monitoring and evaluating teaching and learning (Item 3), while the same number did so on gathering data and conducting evidence based conversations (Item 4); networks to facilitate peer and supervisor relationships (Item 16); a personal professional moral position (Item 17); and professional ethics and related personal values (Item 18).

Reported only once in each case were: discussing international issues with a mentor (Item 9); national reforms, policies and procedures (Item 10); conditions for learning (Item 12); system policies, procedures and leaders' discretionary powers (Item 13); and the curriculum requirements of the system (Item 14).

Summing up the evidence presented across the columns it is fair to say that:

- there was a spread of learning activity and general reported confidence in the focal point – 'Pedagogy';
- there was variability in the way in which respondents reported learning about 'People';
- the 'Place' of learning was reported to favour courses or seminars with less frequent reports of learning favouring informal work sites or the use of a mentor;
- with respect to the focal point – 'System' – learning with peers dominated; and finally,
- there was an absence of reports of learning about the focal point 'Self' through courses, but frequent reports of learning about self with mentors.

The availability of courses and seminars may explain why there is an emphasis on 'Pedagogy'. This should come as no surprise as should the fact that respondents appear to have confidence in their knowledge of this focal point. We can also surmise there are fewer options for professional learning on 'People' using a leadership lens than there are available on 'Pedagogy'. In terms of the focal point 'System', the dominance of learning with peers may be explained by the fact that principals value sharing experience, talking about the future actions they might make, and resolutions that have worked in troublesome incidents. They may regard peers as the best source of knowledge because of their past practice and current experience. In addition, knowledge gained through interaction with peers minimises personal exposure and professional risk. All this said, learning through peers as a preference, may be a reaction to the quality of the courses and programs on offer and the choices available.

Suggested changes to the heuristic

The open-ended questions from the trials suggest changes that should be addressed in a new version of the heuristic. These changes are summarised below.

There was a call for the provision of options so that principals could discriminate on the level of their confidence about each focal point and the accompanying knowledge inventory. This suggests that in the redevelopment of the heuristic we should change column one to allow for a differentiated response, such as: very confident, somewhat confident, and not yet confident.

While we recognise that the heuristic is but a starting point for reflection about leadership knowledge, its use is likely to reveal the need for additions which record an individual's expanding knowledge inventory. With respect to this matter, we acknowledge the need to design the heuristic so that it may be easily amended electronically. For example, should a principal want to include in the focal point Self, knowledge of personal coping strategies, and how to improve them, the instrument should allow for this. Other suggestions for additions to the knowledge inventory which respondents put forward included: evidence-based leadership, curriculum development and assessment, and building relationships with students, staff, parents and community. Just as there may be a need for individuals to make additions, we recognise that the heuristic may be coupled with the assessment of personal strengths and weaknesses from other sources. We accept that on its own, the heuristic is but part of reflection processes to stimulate thinking and conversations with others about personal leadership learning.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this project our purpose was to conduct a pilot study. We administered two trial versions of an heuristic that have resulted in adjustments that we now plan to undertake. The findings of the pilot show that the heuristic is seen as a useful tool for personal reflection, that it is easily addressed, and, in an electronic form, it would allow for adjustments in the light of personal knowledge needs. At the end of the day, the heuristic provides the means for leaders to construct a current leadership learning profile, with future projections made visible. The tool is about individuals, not systems. It assists in putting individual agency back into the professional learning mix, emphasising 'insider' control over professional learning in the face of 'outsider' control of professional development.

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