

Pivotal ways of improving leadership and the scholarship of learning and teaching in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a new model of leadership that can improve the knowledge and skills needed by school leaders who undertake Masters of Business and Masters of Education. The model is called PIVOTAL which stands for Partnerships, Innovation and Vitality – Opportunities for Thriving Academic Leadership. The model is compared and contrasted with existing models. A case study is undertaken to test the effective application of leadership theory as well as improvement in leadership performance within a complex learning community. Three focus groups are undertaken with three groups of School Principals and senior school leaders. The groups are characterised as potential students, current/graduate education students and current/graduate business students. PIVOTAL was found to be a robust model that has the capacity to respond to changing situations.

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Introduction

This research introduces a contemporary model of academic leadership relevant to school leaders yet potentially applicable to other contexts. School leaders face ever increasing accountability, the public reporting of school performance data, nationalised curriculum and external testing regimes. With a concurrent state and national drive for more autonomous schools it is conceivable that these new and reformed leadership models will be crowded out by the managerial, political, resource and symbolic requirements of the role. State school systems seek to increase the autonomy of some school principals in order to improve school effectiveness, both in terms of cost effectiveness and learning outcomes. New leaders within these systems deserve to be offered better pathways. Academic understanding of the holistic nature of leadership is one element in better preparing school leaders. Practical skill development in leadership is another element that will help emerging school leaders as they progress from lower to higher levels of responsibility.

Literature Review

Underpinning the national Excellence in School Leadership model (AITSL, 2011) is an extensive review of the literature conducted by Dempster, Lovett and Fluckiger (2011). Dempster et al. argue that there is a 'gap in research regarding the effects of leadership learning experiences and subsequent development' (p.35). Our research addresses the gap that exists for school leaders who are currently in a transition phase as they prepare for increasingly demanding leadership positions in Education. Halsey's (2011) Australian study of 683 respondents showed that nearly half of those whose first leadership experience was in a rural school reported that they 'had no preparation for the role' and that '29 per cent reported that their preparation was in short courses only' (p.8). Halsey's description infers that there has been a sink or swim approach to leadership. Perhaps this worked in the past when principals saw themselves as line managers in a centralized system where responsibility stopped at a Director, answerable to a Minister for Education or Board. Today principals appointed across all school sectors have more autonomy and responsibility.

Dempster et al. (2011) underline the need for school leaders to be students of 'the big picture' (p.32) in order for them to be able to effectively integrate their leadership skills and develop their professional practice to meet the demands of leading complex learning environments. The preparation gap can be addressed by responding to school leaders' learning needs, by focusing on the big picture in learning activities and by building confidence in leadership capacity.

At a global level, the OECD report on Improving School Leadership (2008) advocates that leadership preparation is current, relevant and able to 'deal with the complex challenges schools are facing in the 21st century' (p.16) whilst Townsend and McBeath's (2011) study of over 60 countries' school leadership experience underlines the assertion that school leadership needs to be relevant to student learning outcomes and attainable for young, aspiring leaders. Effective school leadership debates continue to be echoed widely, with a recent speech in the EU (2013) by Androulla Vassiliou, member of the European Commission responsible for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, advocating identifying 'early in their careers, those teachers that have leadership potential' which 'gives them the opportunity to develop their leadership skills over time' (Vassiliou, 2013).

Within Australia, the independent schools continue to recruit, prioritize and promote principals with desirable personal qualities, high levels of skill and an ability to manage a complex organisation. School leaders, therefore, need to acquire and retain confidence in their leadership capacity and management skills, underpinned by post-

graduate studies. Tertiary providers of such developmental programs, on the other hand, must be innovative and responsive to better meet the needs of the school leaders.

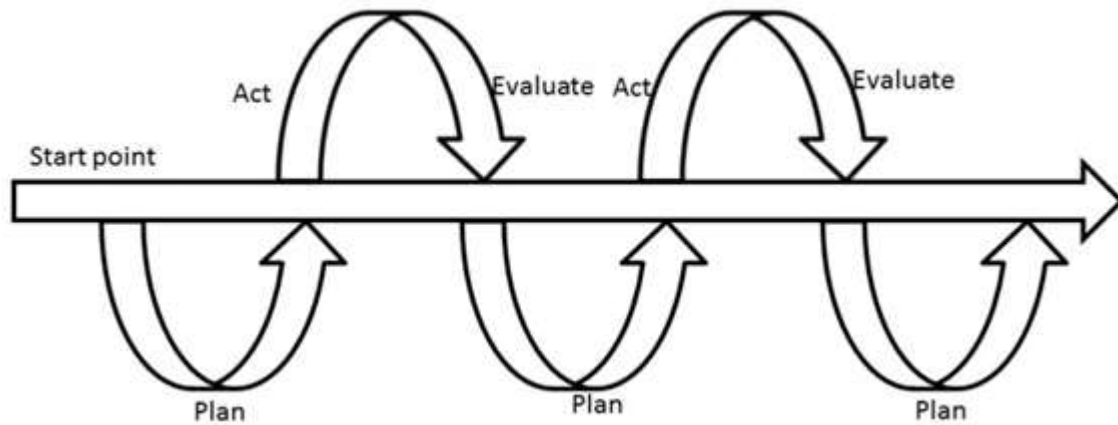
Just over a decade ago Hallinger argued that among the conceptual models that had been employed during the previous 25 years of research into educational leadership, the instructional leadership and transformational leadership models had predominated (Hallinger, 2003). The research he referred to was mainly published in North America and in his 2003 paper he sought to marry the more individualist model of instructional leadership with transformational leadership, where the aim was to involve others, in a shared or distributed leadership. The main aspect that linked these two theories was a leadership focus on improved student learning outcomes. Hallinger made the salient point that educational leadership could not be divorced from the individual school situation. School context was a vital factor. Indeed, leadership was contingent on it. In his literature review Hallinger saw that integration of the two main models was possible via shared instructional leadership or a contingency model of leadership.

In Australia, as we noted above, school leaders must shoulder increasing responsibility and accountability because of the introduction of public reporting of school performance data, a nationalised curriculum and the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) which was introduced in 2008. NAPLAN tests the sorts of skills deemed essential for every child to progress through school and life. In a frank introduction to a 2010 reprint of his earlier article, Hallinger pointed out that 'Leadership models in education are subject to the same faddism in other areas of education. Today's favourite brand is soon replaced by another' (p.330). We run the risk of adding another brand to the leadership shelf but because our study is so contextualized we feel that if it strikes a chord with emerging school leaders in Australia the risk is worth taking.

Method

The project was designed as a piece of educational action research that is grounded in the philosophy of John Dewey (1916), that adheres to the action research principles of Kurt Lewin (1946), and follows the main methodological recommendations of Carr and Kemmis (1983). Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) subsequently developed a model of participatory action research. The intention of all action research is to make changes for the better. In this sense it is both partisan and transformative (Mezirow, 1991). Since 1988 action research has become more and more relevant to educational improvement. The publication of a number of recent books and new editions (Spaulding & Falco, 2013; McNiff, 2013) encourage teachers at all levels to instigate their own research as a way of improving the learning outcomes of their students. Action research involves a spiral process of planning, acting (implementing change), observing, analysing, reflecting and then evaluating (see Figure 1). This completes one full cycle, which generally raises other issues that will be researched and acted upon in a new cycle. In this study we report on the first of two such iterations from our reflections of practice at a regional Australian university combined with interview data obtained from six school principals in the form of a structured focus group. Our study focuses on two sets of leadership courses delivered to on-campus students and off-campus students studying online and located outside the region. It involves university lecturers from the disciplines of Education and Business who facilitate the learning of school leaders returning to postgraduate study.

Figure 1:
Action research process



Source: Kemmis and McTaggart (1988)

Our research aims to improve on leadership curricula in order to, in the future, offer innovative programs, in particular via partnerships in order to produce graduates with knowledge, skills and attributes to succeed in a world characterised by rapid change. In the first cycle, current and past students are asked, in a focus group, to nominate ways to re-design the curriculum in order to personalise learning and enrich schools and their communities. The study itself was designed to add value and nurture ongoing relationships with students and their communities as well as business, government and professional bodies.

The project will ensure that students connect discipline-based theory and practice to the sustainability of their communities, economies and environments. Distinct differences between the two disciplinary areas enable a response to the diverse needs of school leaders, particularly those working in regional, rural and remote contexts. This project builds on and aligns with research by the Curtin University and Charles Sturt University who are working with a Health-focussed project (Office for Learning and Teaching, 2013a), which aims to establish a leadership development program for IP education and practice to create sustainable collaborative practice learning environments.

Results

The investigations probed whether the courses that school leaders undertake to improve their knowledge, skills and professional judgment are perceived to be effective as they might be. Factors which contribute to effective leadership capacity-building are well-demonstrated by McKinsey and Company (Barber, Whelan and Clarke, 2010) on a global scale and can inform how Australian schools plan selection, development and succession of their leaders. Working closely with external educators to maximise input from schools, this study included a Reference Group consisting of principals selected from across the education sectors in Queensland (State, Catholic and Independent schools) and academic staff from a regional Australian university involved in preparation of leadership courses. This project will be extended in the future to form partnerships with school sectors and professional bodies on a state-wide, national and international level in order to investigate further directions and innovations to better suit the needs of school leaders. Shaw (2011) outlines the AHISA (Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia) review of school leadership in the independent school sector which underlines the tripartite relational framework of schools which includes the relationship between the school and outside

organisations. This study aims to develop this concept further across all school sectors of education.

Educational leaders undertaking the Master of Education program do so voluntarily, and our education systems – State, Catholic and Independent - do not mandate further postgraduate study for their leaders (although in several other countries around the world there is this requirement - as in Finland, where even pre-service teacher education is at Master's degree level (Sahlberg, 2010). However, in Australia, such further study is encouraged (and sometimes funded) by employers, and is deemed important in order to progress professionally. It is informally confirmed by enrolled postgraduate students that collegial interaction is a key benefit, perhaps helping to address the isolation that leaders often feel (Caldwell, 2006). Benchmarking USC's leadership courses against equivalent postgraduate education leadership courses at other universities in Australia and internationally will broaden the study base and give the project more national and international relevance whilst responding to school leaders' learning needs at a local level.

Discussion

This project proposes a model of leadership learning, to be used initially in one regional Australian university in a second cycle of action research in order to improve leadership course design. However, in the longer term results will be documented, published electronically and made available to other Australian Universities. The PIVOTAL Leadership Guidelines electronic booklet, which will be developed as a result of this research, will include approaches to Leadership Requirements to implement the Vision and Values, Knowledge and Understanding and Personal Qualities, Social and Interpersonal skills and categories of Professional Practice. The new innovative leadership courses that will be introduced at one university have been shown, in this pilot study, to have the potential to positively affect the application of theory to professional practice. The improvements to leadership practice, reported in this paper, are focused on sustainability, by which we mean that educational leaders will be able to inform postgraduate leadership courses that can enhance their leadership practice, their confidence and their personal satisfaction in leading. Analysis of the data obtained in our study indicates improved communication with and responsiveness to students learning needs by practising school leaders.

The results of the first research cycle also indicate that effective collaboration with colleagues from other educational communities, via reformed Master of Education courses, can improve the capacity of leaders who take the courses. This is at the heart of our sustainable model since each participant, once their awareness is raised, become more able to make a unique contribution to and impact on tertiary leadership training courses that adopt the model, both in Australia and internationally. This opens up the possibility for improvements in school leadership effectiveness across the sectors. There are of course, also mutual benefits of partnerships with the wider education community and timely response to rapidly-changing contextual requirements in school leadership.

Conclusion

The project has capitalised on developmental work informing the National Professional Standards for School Leaders which resulted in the Excellence in School Leadership model (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2011). Our study investigates how a group school leaders in regional Australia perceive the above model. AITSL's Standard Integrated Model clearly aligns Leadership Requirements with Professional Practice demands within unique learning environments, leading to what is anticipated will be 'high quality learning, teaching and schooling', which then leads to

'successful learners, confident, creative individuals and active, informed citizens' (AITSL, 2011).

A second cycle of research, which builds on our findings, will extend the benefits of our initial study and increase partnerships with other tertiary providers of postgraduate Education Leadership programs who are open to adopting our model. It can also affect policy directions of education associations, such as ACEL (Australian Council for Education Leaders) and AHISA (Association of Heads of Independent Schools). Since our findings will inform leadership education in postgraduate Education and Business programs, there are also a number of cross-disciplinary benefits.

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