

The Changing Nature of the Role of Principals in Primary and Junior Secondary Schools in South Australia Following the Introduction Local School Management (Partnerships 21)

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This paper discusses the changing nature of the role of principals following the introduction of local school management (Partnerships 21) in South Australia. The study reports the series of interviews with primary and junior secondary principals with regard to their roles in several areas namely; instructional leadership, teachers' professional development, teacher selection, staff supervision, supervision of students, decision making, budgeting and school finances, curriculum, school council and the parents of the students and major challenges of the principal's role. The findings suggest that there are not great changes in the role of primary and secondary school principals as a result of the introduction of local school management (Partnerships 21). However, the study indicates that the workload of school principals following the introduction of local school management (partnerships 21) in South Australia has increased. In addition, the role of the school principal has also increased in association with the emerging role in working with the governing council and the parents of the students and in relation to decision-making and school budgeting and finances.

Partnerships 21, principal's role, school management, decision making, leadership

PROBLEM

Has the role of a principal changed in primary and junior secondary schools in South Australia as a result of the introduction of Partnerships 21?

INTRODUCTION

Partnerships 21 was the South Australian model of local school management that involved parents and community members in schools and preschools through School Councils and preschool management committees. The idea of introducing Partnerships 21 was based on the work of a Ministerial Working Party on local school management established by the Minister of Education, Children's Services and Training, the Honorable Malcom R. Buckby, and chaired by Associate Professor Ian Cox. Partnerships 21 was launched by the Premier of South Australia and the Minister for Education, Training and Employment on 20 April 1999. It was based on the general guidelines from the Ministerial Working Party Report (Kilvert, 2001). According to the Department of Education, Training and Employment (2000), Partnerships 21 was a unique model of local school management for South Australia. Its main purpose was to improve the quality of education for all children and students in South Australia. Through Partnerships 21 all schools

would have greater freedom and authority with regard to the decisions of the school that were in line with the students' needs.

This new model of local school management addressed three important issues: (a) partnerships that were built among the school community, the government and the community as a whole; (b) quality improvement integrated into three-year school strategic planning, which specified the improvement target that had to be achieved; and (c) resource flexibility that gave a greater authority and responsibility for the school to allocate and use the budget based on the school's needs (Kilvert, 2001; Kilvert, Tunbridge and Dow, 2001).

This study of the changing nature of the role of the principal is driven by the following research questions. These ten research questions formed the conceptual framework for the study. The conceptual framework was built from a review of literature and the research findings in related fields.

1. Has the role of the principal changed with respect to instructional leadership?
2. Has the specific role of the principal in relation to teachers' professional development changed?
3. Has the role of the principal changed in relation to teacher selection?
4. Has the role of the principal changed with respect to staff supervision?
5. Has the principal's role changed with respect to the supervision of the students in the school?
6. Has the role of the principal changed with respect to decision making?
7. Has the role of the principal changed with respect to budgeting and school finances?
8. Has the nature of the principal's role changed with respect to the curriculum?
9. Has the role of the principal changed in relation to the school council and to the parents of the students?
10. If the principal's role has changed, what are the major challenges in the implementation of the principal's new role?

METHOD OF INQUIRY

This study was designed using the descriptive method based on a case study approach. The technique for the data collection in this study is through in-depth interviews with selected principals in South Australia with regard to the changing nature of the role of school principals in primary and junior secondary schools following the introduction of local school management (Partnerships 21).

It was decided in this initial study to conduct the interviews with only four school principals in order to examine the information available in considerable detail. It was thought that the analysis of information provided by a larger number of respondents would be both very time consuming and complex, and as a consequence much of the detail of interest would be lost in the report prepared.

Four respondents from four public schools in South Australia, two in metropolitan and two in rural areas, with two males and two females, were chosen to represent a population of principals. The participants, the school sites and the detailed information provided in the interviews remained confidential and anonymous as had been stated in the letter of introduction from the researcher's supervisor to the four school principals. The researcher also informed the interviewees that their

names would not be revealed in the report of the study as had been stated in their confidentiality agreement. Anonymous names are used in this report for the school principals; namely, Principal A, Principal B, Principal C and Principal D.

FINDINGS

This section discusses further the findings from the study of four school principals. The findings from the study were categorized within each of the ten aspects of the conceptual framework that was identified as being likely to change following the introduction of Partnerships 21. The ten themes addressed were:

- (a) instructional leadership,
- (b) teacher professional development,
- (c) teacher selection and supervision,
- (d) supervision of students,
- (e) decision making processes,
- (f) budgeting and finances,
- (g) curriculum,
- (h) school council and the parents of the students, and
- (i) role challenges.

Instructional leader

With regard to role change in Partnerships 21, Principal A noted that the role of school principal had changed in terms of the availability of funding and resource flexibility so that the school principal could seek new ideas and innovations in delivering education and exercising leadership. This could be done simply because, under Partnerships 21, the government provided schools with 'bucket of money' to support the programs and activities that the school implemented. In contrast, Principal B believed that instructional leadership still remained a main part of the principal's role. There were not any shifts in a principal's role in instructional leadership under Partnerships 21. He noted that "the role has not changed in terms of the instructional leadership; that is a major part of the role of school principal". Moreover, Principal C argued: "I believe that the focus has always been on being an instructional leader ... I think fundamentally it hasn't changed". Similarly, Principal D acknowledged that the role of principal as instructional leader was still bound to issues in relation to teaching and learning. She indicated: "I've spent a lot of time working in the middle school and working ... with staff so it's been curriculum, teaching, learning still being a very big part of my job".

Under Partnerships 21, a school principal received a greater amount of money and the school had resource flexibility and was able to utilize its resources to facilitate the professional growth of teachers with regard to instructional processes. However, the role of school principal in relation to instructional leadership under Partnerships 21 remained the same as prior to Partnerships 21 where a school leader had also focused on teaching and learning in the classroom, provided curricula and ensured that the learning needs of the students were met. Thus the nature of a principal's role had in instructional leadership had not changed greatly following the introduction of Partnerships 21.

Teachers' professional development

With respect to role change in professional development in Partnerships 21, Principal B argued that supporting and developing teachers' knowledge through the training and development of teachers had become a part of a principal's role prior to Partnerships 21. He noted: "I've always felt, even prior to Partnerships 21 ... that we need to be sure that our teachers keep on developing

their skills and their knowledge ... then we need to support their professional development". Moreover, Principal D argued that the change was "not directly as a result of Partnerships 21; it's more a response to lack of government funding for teachers' professional development in the first place". In addition, Principal C was concerned with providing training and development for teachers and that task was part of the responsibility role. Principal C commented: "We're more responsible for ensuring staff have the appropriate training and development and that they get the training and development they need so we're always responsible for that". In contrast, Principal A stated that under Partnerships 21 the school received a greater amount of money and he could utilize that money for searching for creative and innovative ways for undertaking professional development. The main idea in professional development under Partnerships 21 was the school principal could support many professional developments activities that just could not be done previously. Principal A noted:

We've always had a professional development program that's been pretty good but because of the big bucket of money and the flexibilities that come with it, we provide opportunities for teachers that we wouldn't have been able to provide before; we could have but we just didn't have the head set, we never used to think about it so what Partnerships 21 has done is actually [to] expand... and...come up with new ideas.

The principals' role in teachers' professional development remained largely unchanged as following the introduction of Partnerships 21. However, a principal could develop greater innovation and creativity in seeking new ideas and a new vision of conducting professional development through a greater flexibility in government funding. A principal could encourage teachers to undertake professional development in many different forms such as seminars, conferences, classroom observation, action research and workshops to increase their learning and teaching skills.

Teacher selection

With respect to Partnerships 21 in the selection of teachers, Principal B noted: "I don't think there's been any real gains in terms of quality of staff and the say that I get selecting staff". Similarly, Principal D commented that the role of the school principal with regard to teacher selection had not changed. She acknowledged: "Most of the staff coming to this school come as contract teachers first of all and, if they like it and want to be here, they apply for a school choice vacancy and get permanency". However, Principal C noted: "We have [a] little bit more say over [the] selection of staff than we used to". Moreover, Principal A admitted that the role of school principal with respect to staff selection had changed. He commented: "When Partnerships [21] came ... there was the attempt to increase the amount of selection that principals had in their staff". He further argued that under Partnerships 21, the Department of Education, Training and Employment had increased the selection of staff. However, because Partnerships 21 had been stopped, the amount of staff selection remained little. He noted: "Partnerships 21 has now been stopped, the processes, the industrial processes that are [exist] now, mean that our schools have very little selection any more, virtually none".

The principal's role in teacher selection under Partnerships 21 was a major issue that principals faced and in which they had little or no voice in the selection of new teachers because it was determined centrally. The role of principal had not changed following the introduction of Partnerships 21. However, a principal had some voice with regard to the selection processes for new staff particularly for leadership positions such as coordinators, assistant principals and deputy principals. Moreover, a principal also had a voice with respect to the selection of contract teachers.

Staff supervision

With respect to role change in staff supervision under Partnerships 21, Principal D noted some changes. The role of Principal D was to ensure that teachers not only engaged in learning and teaching in classrooms but also, from a broader perspective, ensured that teachers monitored and supervised students with respect to their educational development. In contrast, Principal B noted that the role of school principal with respect to supervision of staff has not changed. He noted that in relation to staff supervision, “the processes that were run prior to Partnerships 21 continue today so that has not changed”. Moreover, Principal A commented that there have not been any changes with respect to staff supervision. She concurred: “I think a lot of what we did about staff supervision has been in place for a long time”. Similarly, Principal C acknowledged that there has not been a real change in staff supervision in relation to Partnerships 21. The only change occurred in a philosophical sense and related to accountability. She noted:

It’s a change in general philosophy [about] being much more focused and accountable anyway and Partnerships 21 has been a part of a bigger accountability move I believe, so now we are more focused and expecting outcomes from our people in terms of performance management but Partnerships 21 doesn’t do it alone.

The role of the principal in staff supervision was unchanged following the introduction of Partnerships 21. A principal supervised staff in terms of giving assistance in dealing with the classroom teaching, providing teachers’ learning needs and visiting classrooms. These activities aimed to monitor the progress and the development of classroom teaching. Meaningful and constructive feedback would be given either for poor or good performances that were shown by classroom teachers.

Supervision of students in the school

With respect to role change in the supervision of students under Partnerships 21, the principal’s role had not changed. Principal B noted: “Supervising students is one of the key parts of the role and that’s not changed because of Partnerships 21; that’s remained the same”. Similarly, Principal C argued that supervision of students within the school was part of the principal’s role and “in terms of Partnerships 21 it hasn’t made a lot of difference”. Moreover, Principal D noted that there is no change with respect to students’ supervision under Partnerships 21 “because Partnerships 21 is about financial management and that’s quite remote from the work that we do with students”. Similarly, Principal A admitted that Partnerships 21 had no relationship with the supervision of students. He commented: “Partnerships 21 had very very little direct impact on students. It has on programs but not on students”.

The role of the principal in the supervision of students in the school under Partnerships 21 had not changed. However, Partnerships 21 had brought new ideas and insights of conducting staff supervision in the school. For example, students who were involved in the students’ representative body undertook training in leadership and participated in determining the programs and activities that were run by the school.

Decision making process

With respect to role change in decision making in Partnerships 21, Principal B noted: “I have always been very open in my decision making processes and have always tried to be highly inclusive of all the groups within the school”. Similarly, Principal D commented that the role of the school with respect to decision-making had not changed. She noted: “I believe all the time about involvement of parents, involvement of students, involvement of community and of course a lot of staff as well so I think it was—all those things were always there”. Moreover, the role of

school principal in the decision making process had not changed. Principal A noted: “It has with some issues about staffing and it certainly has with respect to parents and decision making but probably not within the school”. In contrast, Principal C commented that the role of school principal with respect to decision-making had changed, particularly decision making with regard to budgeting and financial issues. Every decision that had to be made with respect to money spent had to be consulted with staff, the parents of students, students and the school council.

The principal’s role in decision making had changed under Partnerships 21 in which the school principal exercised more democratic and open door decision making processes that involved all the elements of the school community and the community as a whole. Teachers were not only the party who were involved in the decision making process, but non- teaching staff, namely, ancillary staff, who were also members of the school community; therefore they also had the right to be involved in decision making processes.

Budgeting and school finances

In relation to role change in budgeting and school finances under Partnerships 21, the role of school principal had changed particularly with regard to the training needs of staff with respect to this issue. Principal B admitted: “I’ve had quite an amount of training and development in terms of understanding the budgetary process and the accounting system”. Moreover, Principal D commented: “Now you watch every dollar ... you’re much [more] aware of the financial makeup of your school”. Principal C noted: “I am more accountable now for what I spend. Under the old system it was very hard to go broke because everything was managed centrally”. Moreover, Principal A admitted that the school had responsibility for monitoring and for the operation of the whole budget. Principal A acknowledged that in the past the school was funded by the parents of the students, but under Partnerships 21 the school would receive a global budget that covered all the expenditure that the school had, including teachers’ salaries and facilities. He noted: “Now we have responsibility for the whole global budget including salaries, facilities and resourcing utilities, whereas before we only had the parent funding to control and look after”.

There were great changes in the principal’s role in school budgeting under Partnerships 21. The principals focused their role both on leadership and administration as well as taking responsibility for management. There was a great shift in the management of the school under Partnerships 21 with regard school budgeting and finances in which the school received a global budget and had greater flexibility due to the particular conditions that the school faced.

Curriculum

With regard to role changes in curriculum, Principal D noted that under Partnerships 21 the role of the school principal had not changed. It changed “through becoming principal ... I think it’s more a factor of how big your school is ... what I have to do here, is work with students through students action council and that way I meet the students regularly and keep in touch and visit lots of classrooms”. Similarly, Principal A noted that there was a change with regard to curriculum. However, he admitted that the change had no relationship to Partnerships 21. He argued that the role of the principal has changed “in terms of thinking about education and teaching than it has with curriculum”. In contrast, Principal B noted that there had been changes with regard to curriculum under Partnerships 21. He commented: “There has been a positive shift in that there has been more focus on learning programs and in particular the way those programs are delivered to maximize the learning for kids”. Moreover, Principal C argued that under Partnerships 21 the school had gained greater accountability “for what we teach with students, more accountable for the outcomes, more accountable for things like attendance and retention than we were before”.

The role of principal with respect to the curriculum had not changed under Partnerships 21. However, each principal had some flexibility in delivering the curriculum and this depended on the creativity of the classrooms teachers, because they were the persons who understood and knew well the learning needs of their students. For instance, the classroom teacher, in collaboration with the governing council and school principal, developed a curriculum that addressed recent issues that were being faced by the young people such as drug addiction and sex education.

School council and the parents of the students

In relation to role change in Partnerships 21, Principal B noted that the role of school principal had changed with regard to the school council and the parents of the students. He commented that the role changed in terms of greater empowerment for parents. He noted: "I think they [governing council] would be more empowering for parents in terms of strengthening their role with the school community". Principal C argued: "Under Partnerships 21 ... there is a stronger emphasis on making sure that they're involved, and that they're involved at policy level and a big picture level [and] influence the strategic directions of the school than there was under the previous model". Moreover, Principal A acknowledged that there was a wider role played by the school council and the parents of the students with regard to establishing school policy and strategic direction. He noted: "Before Partnerships 21 we had school councils ... they had no real power they were just purely advisory. Now we have a governing council and the governing council has the joint responsibility with the principal to set policy and strategic direction". Principal D also highlighted that there had been changes with respect to the role of the school principal in relation to the school council and the parents of the students. There was a greater role for parents, particularly Aboriginal parents, to be involved in the governing council. She indicated that:

The other area that I've worked in is in involving Aboriginal parents on governing council—in the past there was an ASSPA—Aboriginal Student Support Parent Committee and I'd encourage those people to be members of governing council so, for example, two Aboriginal people working in the school also have kids in this school and are also on governing council. We've looked at it flexibly, kind of around the rules in that we've got two places for aboriginal parents on our governing council but it's not necessarily the same parent all the time; it's anyone from that ASSPA committee who will come along on the night and that's actually worked because we now have Aboriginal parents being involved.

The role of principal with regard to the school council and the parents of the students has changed greatly under Partnerships 21 and the school council is now involved in shaping the policy of the school, providing policy direction and in policy development. Principals together with the governing council develop a new curriculum that is in line with students' needs. They played a major role in overseeing monitoring the school budgeting and finances; and they are involved in every part of the decision making within the school.

Major challenges of the principal's role

Principal A believed that the workload of the school principal following the introduction of local school management had increased. He noted, "There's too much to do sometimes". Similarly, Principal C felt that her workload had increased. She stated, "Sure it is a long day and all kinds of thing". However, in relation to principals' workload, she perceived it in a positive way by stating, "You need to manage the job rather than the job manage you". Moreover, Principal B noted that principal's workload has increased significantly following the introduction of Partnerships 21. He commented that "initially the workload did increase quite significantly, probably 20 per cent I would say prior before 21 [Partnerships 21]". He also noted the workload increased:

Probably another five or so hours a week in terms of just understanding the financial aspects of running a school. That, to me, created the bulk of the workload, ensuring that the monthly reports were checked and accurate ... all of that took time and needed to be followed up consistently so that did increase the amount of time.

Principal D raised the same issue. She commented that her workload and teachers' workload had increased and she worked up to 80 hours a week. She commented:

Always, always, 80-hour weeks. That's why you ask yourself, for how many more years will I keep doing 80 hour weeks because I have for the last eight, or ten years and so have most of my colleagues. So yes, that's a huge issue. So too [are loads] for my teachers. 1992 was the first year of the implementation of increased class size and cutbacks particularly on secondary teachers.

The issues in relation to a principal's workload had also been discussed by several authors. They perceived that the role of principal has become overloaded (Fullan, 1992; Hoyle, 1988; Caldwell, 1998). The research on perception and preferences of principals with respect to the new role in Schools of the Future in Victoria found that the "work load of principals has increased since the base-line survey in the pilot phase in 1993, rising from a mean of 57 hours per week to 59 hours per week" (Caldwell, 1998, p.3). Fullan (1992, p.89) pointed out that the principal's activities were overloaded because their "priorities are a mixture of political and educational merit".

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

It is obvious from this study that there have not been great changes in the role of the school principal in primary and junior secondary schools following the introduction of local school management (Partnerships 21) in South Australia. However, the study has indicated that the workloads of school principals under Partnerships 21 have increased substantially and they work more than 59 hours per week as suggested by Caldwell (1998). Moreover, school principals have many different levels of expectation, particularly expectations from students, parents, and community toward the schooling provided. In addition, the role of the school principal has also increased in association with their new emerging role in working with the governing council and the parents of the students and in relation to decision-making and school budgeting and finances.

Implications

This study has a number of implications for educational practitioners and policy makers. However, due to the limited scope of the study, this can be viewed a potential source of ideas for conducting a further investigation in the field of school leadership and educational management.

For school principals, it is essential to rethink and reshape their roles in an ever-changing world, particularly in the area of teachers' professional development through the introduction of new learning technology within the school curriculum. It is believed that in the near future, the educational system in a local, national and global context must rethink the needs of the integration and the embedment of information and communications technology into the school curriculum as the new challenge in the field of education. Therefore, it is a principal's role and responsibility to create and build a positive environment and cultural awareness for teachers and provide a continuing and enduring support for them to improve their knowledge and skills. Moreover, school principals should develop a new learning forum within schools so that teachers could share new learning experiences in a collegial manner. This forum functions as the basis for the implementation of theory into real practice.

Furthermore, school principals must exercise their leadership in an open and democratic manner in relation to the management and administration of education in which all stakeholders are actively involved and participate in policy making, policy direction and policy development. The findings in this study have highlighted the needs of school principals to implement democratic decisions in all aspects of school programs, school activities and school policies. This greater involvement and participation does not mean that the community and the parents of students take over the role and the responsibility of principals as well as the control of schools but rather that they want their voices to be heard and they want to play a participative and responsible role in the education of their children.

There are implications for policy makers which relate to establishing policy in education. This includes substantial changes in approaches to education, and new programs from the Department must be valued and supported to meet the needs of schools. Moreover, there need to be new policies that involve the greater authority and responsibility being given to school principals in relation to staff recruitment and selection. The Department, in collaboration with schools, should redevelop and re-design the procedures and processes of staff selection, and each school must be given greater authority to select and appoint its staff. Finally, any newly established policy from the Department of Education, Training and Employment should be implemented with the full knowledge of the parents of the students and the community as a whole.

Concluding comment

Research in school leadership and educational management is a continuing and ongoing process, particularly the shift in management of the school from the central office to the school level. Thus, the greater shift in management of schools, particularly in South Australia, coincided with a major movement in terms of accountability and the devolution of authority and responsibility to local sites. With regard to this major shift, current issues must be addressed. They embrace the inclusion and equity for all children to receive better schooling and greater access to school resources and facilities. All students must have equal rights to participate actively in school programs. Moreover, discrimination with regard to issues of ethnicity, religion and social background should be addressed, particularly in the State of South Australia, which is comprised of a multicultural society that highly respects the issue of freedom of speech and choice. In addition, the demand for schools to move towards market and business oriented practices without the abandonment of the main mission of schooling itself, should be examined in order to survive in a highly competitive world. The school leaders should create innovative thinking pertaining to school funding by offering programs and activities that financially benefit the schools in order to sustain the important tasks of providing children with a high quality education.

Furthermore, the issue of curriculum change and curriculum development should be continually addressed particularly in areas related to information and communications technology and new learning organizations. This can be done through an intensive examining and analysing of the needs of students and the needs of the market place. Finally, the high demand placed on the community to control the school's curriculum and programs, as well as school activities, should be addressed. Community involvement in schools' programs and activities are highly welcomed but this participation must comply with the guidelines, regulations, and clearly defined roles and responsibilities that have been previously agreed upon.

These issues will continue to occur in more complex forms with respect to the management of schools in South Australia. They are the recurrent issues that need to be addressed because they are part of conflicting and demanding issues that practitioners and decision makers must consider. Neglecting and abandoning these major issues would create an unstable environment and further endanger the sustainability of the running of educational organizations. As a consequence, there

needs to be a strong commitment that is built among all the parties involved. These parties need to work continually together in a respectful manner and they must be committed to change.

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