

Principal Work

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About the Author

Dr Wendy Cahill received an Australia Day Honour in 2015 and was invested as a member of the Order of Australia (AM). The citation read “*for significant service to education, to professional standards development and to improved outcomes for students*”. Previous Awards include an international Fulbright Scholarship in 1985, and a Papal Honour in 2010. She is a Fellow of both the Australian College of Educational Leaders (FACEL) and the Australian College of Education (FACE). Wendy completed her Doctoral studies and subsequently worked for a time in senior roles at the University of Melbourne. An experienced Principal, she was head of INet Australia (International Networking for Educational Transformation), during which she networked with schools across sectors, locally, nationally and internationally. Throughout this time, she led more than two hundred principals and senior educators on international study tours, which included workshops at OECD and UNESCO. Currently, as an educational strategist, she manages her own consultancy team, and continues to accept work on significant research projects.

Principal Work

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this exercise is to examine relevant, current research and to spotlight studies that reveal significant insight into the complex contexts and changing work practices of the school Principal¹, both in Primary and Secondary contexts in 2016 and beyond.

The scope of the paper is confined generally to comprehensive reports within the last ten years. The task has been commissioned to provide insight from the literature in order to provide a clear indication of changing work contexts and expectations of the school principal and the resultant effect on interest in the role of principal as a career option.

2016: The Status Quo

The welcome release in July 2011 of the Australian Standard for Principals by The Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) had the goal of defining the role of the Principal and providing some unification of Principals nationally. The National Standard is based on three leadership requirements

- vision and values
- knowledge and understanding
- personal qualities and social and interpersonal skills².

Further expansion of these requirements in the document has provided a framework for Principals, as well as clarity and knowledge for Principal action for the past five years. Generally, Australia can boast of excellent schools with well-informed and competent leaders, who work well within the AITSL requirements.

¹ Throughout the paper, the word Principal also takes in those teachers who have attained Principal Class

² Retrieved from <http://www.aitsl.edu.au/australian-professional-standard-for-Principals>. As this document is well known and accepted it was deemed unnecessary to quote further details.

In 2016, we are alert to the fact that leadership is critical to the performance of organisations in almost every sector of the economy. Whilst the importance of the role of the Principal is sometimes still the

subject of debate in education, the significance of the main leader role is now taken for granted in business, politics, the military and almost every other area of public life (Barber, Whelan and Clarke: 2010:6).

However, the dynamic environment of this decade and the rapidity of change adds a level of complexity for leaders of schools. Principals and their deputies/assistants view their roles differently from the former, hierarchical structures. This change and complexity was evidenced as being present almost a decade ago in the OECD international Report on Improving School Leadership (2009) which highlighted the fact that the skills and knowledge which children require in the 21st century are becoming more complex and the range of other issues which schools are expected to address is growing.

This situation has escalated, so that now Principal Voice is raised in the quest for current information from local, national and international sources in order to contribute further to a well-informed understanding of the existing work practices, or job functions expected of a leader, which can legitimately relate to the current role of a school Principal, who can lead schools effectively in 2016 and beyond.

In recent years educational organisations, academics and educational consultants have worked to produce significant reports, which contain important insights into aspects of the Principalship. Included in this study, as particularly relevant to Australian schools, are reports from: the Mitchell Institute, The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), The Department for Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), Educational Transformations, The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) the National College of School Leadership, McKinsey and Company and the Wallace Foundation³. It is the reports from these organisations, together with additional resources from educational journals that inform this paper.

³ These works are referenced throughout the paper , and detailed in the List of References

Complex Contexts for Principal Work

There is agreement almost globally that schools are confronted with an increasingly complex environment, and the OECD Improving Leadership study identified three barriers which must be overcome for schools to successfully address these challenges. These barriers are:

- Principals' roles are intensifying
- The profession is ageing
- Working conditions are unattractive (2009:13)

Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2014) echo the findings of this OECD study which suggests that what is expected of a Principal far exceeds what one person alone can achieve. Furthermore, as the average age of Principals is increasing, it is imperative to develop clear plans for future leadership and effective processes for leadership succession. However, negative images are attached to the job, which is often viewed as overburdened, offering inadequate salaries and poor working conditions.

More recently, initial findings in the first longitudinal independent project to measure the wellbeing of Principals in Australian Government, Catholic and Independent schools, found that Principals are overloaded and are suffering due to stress of taking on extra responsibilities without support. The key reasons identified for causing the job related stress were:

- volume of work
- growing complexity of their work
- lack of time to focus on teaching and student learning

In the December 2015 update, the report found “a decrease (55% - 39%) of principals working more than 25 hours per week in school holiday periods from 2011 to 2015. In addition, the increasing rate of job satisfaction was also significantly higher than the general population. The study also highlighted the worrying increase of principals subjected to violence (Riley et al 2015:).

What needs to be considered in relation to this report is that it has gathered data from across the three sectors, so these figures do not relate just to schools in one sector. Nevertheless, they do provide an insight into the complexities of the present educational environment.

However, the remit of this paper is to highlight the complexity of the context and the demands of the current multiplicity of job functions expected of the school Principal. Furthermore, emergent questions will be identified to serve as focus areas for collaborative discussions with Principals, as they move forward into leading schools, and so preparing our young people to move into a future, already expected to be vastly different from our past.

Because major studies such as those mentioned above already have offered detailed reports, this paper intends not to emulate, but to learn from these recent studies, to spotlight relevant issues for further consideration and to explore attitudes, behaviour, expectations and perceptions as they impinge on the work of Principals in 2016, and the attraction of future applicants for this important role.

The Role of the School Principal

Experienced Principals would be well aware of earlier descriptions of leadership by adjective that included leadership as 'charismatic', 'participative', 'democratic', 'transformational' and many more descriptive terms used to focus leadership! Principals were challenged to select which of the adjectives best suited their leadership purpose. Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson and Walstrom (2014) warned however, of the need to be sceptical about leadership by adjective and similarly, the observation of Barber, Whelan and Clark (2010:7) is that we need to be developing leaders with large repertoires of practices and the capacity to choose from that repertoire as needed, not leaders trained in the delivery of one 'ideal' set of practices.

This is not to underestimate the role of the Principal in instructional leadership, which is recognised in most countries as one, if not the chief responsibility of the Principal, and is well understood by Principals in practice. Leithwood et al (2014) confirm the term 'instructional leader' has been in vogue for decades as the desired model for educational leaders - Principals especially.

In the analysis of the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), it is stated that a key focus of the TALIS instruments was to better understand the role of Principals in the variety of leadership capacities that they fulfil within a school. (2014:40). Significant for this paper is the citing of Marzano, Walters and Mc Nulty (2005), in the

assertion that 'there is no clear, well-articulated body of research about the role of the Principal and school leadership'. Later, the ACER Report authors, Freeman, O'Malley and Everleigh (2014) further reference Aydin, Sarierf and Uysal (2003), Lucas et al (2013), Chin (2007) and others in the contention that 'Principals influence the climate and organisation of their school and the conditions under which staff, especially teachers work'.

Those outside education may garner the perspective that it is waste of time and energy for Principals to be attending to parent complaints, or to misbehaving students and other issues that they see as peripheral. However, caution is needed to allow Principals the flexibility within their own context to judge where and when they become involved in different aspects of their school. Debate may still feature in the literature as to the actual role of the school Principal; however, what is clear is that at the core of most definitions of leadership for a school Principal are two main functions: 'providing direction' and 'exercising influence'.

Long lists of 'jobs' appear in many documents examining the role of the Principal. One such list was generated for the Victorian Department of Education (1998), which identifies well over one hundred items, which come under the major heading of 'run the school community'⁴. Whilst most items listed still come under the wide umbrella of school organisation, to generate such a list today would serve no useful purpose, especially for the self-managing or transforming school.

As Yukl (1994: 3) notes: leadership influences '...the interpretation of events for followers, the choice of objectives for the group or organization, the organization of work activities to accomplish objectives, the motivation of followers to achieve the objectives, the maintenance of cooperative relationships and teamwork and the enlistment of support and cooperation from people outside the group or organization'.

Some writers claim there are vast differences between the roles of a primary school Principal, compared with the Principal of a secondary school. Such differences do abound from school to school, across systems and indeed, across suburbs within the same sector. School culture is often very strong, so expectations vary widely from school to

⁴ Sourced from Australian Principals Federation. Department of Education (February 1998) *Cases 21* Pg 43

school. However, in offering a general framework, AITSL together with many other worthwhile studies of leadership over recent decades, have provided much insight into how 'good Principals' behave and what they believe. This has been translated into professional learning programs for Principals and those aspiring to the role. Interestingly, 'Despite differences in context, the similarities between what Principals do, what motivates them, and what they find supportive in different systems greatly outnumber the differences' (McKinsey 2010:9).

According to Barber, Whelan and Clark in reporting on the International Review of School Leadership undertaken by the McKinsey Group 'Almost all Principals say that setting vision and direction, supporting the development of staff and ensuring effective management systems and processes are the biggest contributors to the success of their school (2010:7).

Most schools incorporate three major groups: parents, students and staff who gather together for an educative purpose, under the direction of a school Principal. Similarly, the view expressed by Bentley and Cazaly (2015: 26) sees education as a 'set of relationships through which a wide range of people and activities are coordinated to create more than the sum of their parts'. The school Principal provides direction, exercises influence and has a direct connection and responsibility to each of these groups who combine to form the school community.

Furthermore, these three groups of relationships from their unique perspectives, consciously or unconsciously influenced by the Principal, have expectations of the person in that role, as do other members of the wider community and the education authorities. Moreover, the school Principal has expectations of him- or herself in the role in this particular school with these particular students, staff and parents.

So, any school Principal carries a combination of expectations about their performance as Principal of the school. What is important is that these are articulated, so there is a clear, realistic set of expectations, minimising the possibility of role overlap with those who share in different levels of leadership. This is increasingly important with schools undertaking distributed leadership.

Distributed Leadership

Successful leaders develop and count on contribution from many others in their organisations. In recent years, there has been strong opinion, that there ought to be a re-distribution of work within the school. Schleicher (2012) quoted in the ACER analysis of TALIS (2013:46) contends that because of its complexity, the work of the school and especially the work of the Principal are increasingly recognised as responsibilities that are, or should be shared. This poses an important question: Shared with whom? Principals already are reluctant to add to the roles and responsibilities of already overburdened principal class. The staffing situation in most schools is not adequate to accept 'sharing the load' as an answer to work overload.

In their paper Professional Practice and Performance for Improved Learning, DEECD (2012) describe 'distributed leadership' as meaning that Principals enlist the support of other school leaders to create professional learning communities that motivate teachers to improve teaching practice. Furthermore, they quote the work of Bush and Glover (2012) to suggest that distributing leadership motivates and helps to secure the commitment of all school leaders to the school's vision and priorities.

Consequently, this has highlighted the possibility of challenges of organisational trust; individual threat and the fear of giving others real, authentic responsibility. With distributed leadership comes distributed accountability, it is not some open-ended approach to leadership, in fact the converse is true.

If school leaders are architects of trust (McEvily & Zaheer, 2004), schools into the future need to be more open about building trust among the next level leaders to whom distributed leadership is entrusted: Why talk about trust? Not only because trust has long been neglected as an essential philosophical and ethical concept, but also because talking about trust is essential to building trust.

Even if talking about trust can be awkward or uncomfortable, it is only by talking about trust, and trusting, that trust can be created, maintained and restored. 'Not talking about trust, on the other hand... can too easily betray a lack of trust, or result in talking about trust, on the other hand... can too easily betray a lack of trust, or result in

continuing distrust. Trust... is, and must be made to be, a matter of conscientious choice' (Solomon & Flores, 2001:153).

Harris (2014) cautions that if distributed leadership is to be authentic then the skills of professional collaboration are critically important. How can you share leadership if teachers cannot work together? In summary, authentic, distributed leadership is 'leadership by expertise' rather than leadership by role or years of experience. Genuine distributed leadership requires high levels of trust, transparency and mutual respect.

The evidential base about the impact and effect of distributed leadership has been summarised in numerous books and articles (Leithwood et al., 2009; Harris, 2013).

Assistant Principals and competent deputies are in place in most schools to share the authority and responsibility of the Principal in delegated areas. In the last decade, distributed leadership has contributed greatly to areas of delegation. However, the final responsibility for leading the school remains that of the Principal.

System Leadership

Every Australian school has dozens of connections stretching beyond their individual organisations. These connections form part of a 'hidden wiring' of social capital and informal exchange. It is wiring that supports teaching and learning and provides a constant supply of information and social learning, influencing the behaviour and outlook of everyone in the school. (Bentley and Cazaley 2015: 55).

Working successfully with other schools and school leaders, collaborating and developing relationships of interdependence and trust is a new role for many school leaders that is not always easy, particularly in environments still dominated by competition.

System leadership, as these forms of collaboration are sometimes described, means directing leaders' energies beyond their own schools to the welfare of all children and young people in their city, town or region. Focusing on improving the profession as a whole in ways that

access learning support from others provides benefits to everyone's schools and communities (OECD, 2009).

One significant, international trend is towards the devolution of school management, which makes the role of Principals and decisions at school level progressively more important, even to system leadership.

School systems in a number of countries including England and Australia have explored self-managing schools and self-transforming schools. Caldwell (2013:3) describes a self-transforming school as one that 'achieves or is well on its way to achieving significant, systematic and sustained change that secures success for all of its students regardless of the setting'.

Furthermore, he suggests, that the challenge for schools is to do well in what they are currently expected to do at the same time that they keep an eye on promising innovations and future possibilities, basically a 'split screen' approach.

Caldwell also cautions that each must be done well if a self-managing school is to be also a self-transforming school. 'A cause for concern is that so much time and energy is taken up with what are proving to be dysfunctional aspects of current demands, especially those concerned with the frequently excessive and unrelenting focus on testing, and the seemingly endless and often unnecessary demands for accountability' (Caldwell: 2014).

Deep Leadership

David Hargreaves contributed much to the understanding of leadership in school transformation when he described Deep Leadership as about ensuring that the school is a community of learners working in partnership, both internally as well as externally with other organisations and people who share the commitment to learning. Deep Leadership he suggests, is more closely linked to concepts such as Etienne Wenger's 'communities of practice' than to some of the mainstream – and vast – literature on leadership' (Hargreaves, 2006: 21).

With this change, comes the responsibility of the Principal to build capacity of staff to exercise leadership. This is where the notion of deep

leadership is useful. Defined ten years ago, it seems to sit well with the essential learning needed to inform Principals moving towards an undefined future context:

'Deep Leadership means redesigning education so that, through a culture of personalisation and co-construction with shared leadership, the school secures deep experience, deep support and deep learning for all its students' (Hargreaves 2006: 9).

Future Leadership

A reassuring description of what is likely and what is preferred is contained in the following vision: 'A transformed school will not look like that brick building set apart from the society it is intended to serve. A transformed school will be an integrated part of the community and its students will be active participants and contributors to the community. In short, a transformed school will look more like life' (Houle and Cobb 2011: 72).

This supports the view of Whitby (2016a) who identifies that as the nature of the work changes it is imperative that schools have strong leaders who are excited by the challenge of transforming learning and teaching. He urges that we need leaders who will lead a culture of change and innovation; and leaders who can ask the important questions about the transformation possibilities of technology and big data on learning and teaching. This vision surely would excite potential leaders as they contemplate the role of Principal in future schools.

However, the OECD has raised the importance of making school leaders salaries attractive. 'Salary levels can have an impact on the attractiveness of school leadership and School leaders' salaries must compare favourably with similar jobs in the public service and leaders in the private sector. The huge increase in workload and responsibilities of Principals demands that their salary be significantly higher than that of teachers' (2009: 22).

The Identification and Development of Potential Leaders

Still, the recurring question seems to be: does the workload have significant influence on recruiting teachers for administrative and leadership roles. In summary, there is a belief that from the senior

teachers' perspectives that the additional compensation is far too little and the demands and stresses too great and the commitment of time far in excess of what is required of teachers. These beliefs echo much of the existing research on this issue (Leithwood and Azah, 2014: 17).

Indeed, coming to grips with the unique responsibility of the Principal; providing adequate recognition and remuneration packages and support for coping reasonably with the multiple expectations of the role, may have a positive influence on the attraction of good people to take on the role of Principal in the coming years.

This is an area for much thought and collaborative decision-making. It also opens a 'can of worms' about selection processes for appropriate candidates; qualification and experience issues, as well as appropriate on-going support in the role. According to expressed opinions of experienced current principals, too often 'support' provided to Principals may be misplaced, out of date, provided just to assist achievement of Government goals, or insufficient for current need. Genuine, holistic support is required.

However, on 16th March this year, the Wallace Foundation in USA, launched a five-year, \$47million initiative to help universities improve how they prepare future Principals. While research has proven that School Principals matter significantly to teaching and learning, their preparation has struggled to keep pace with the growing demands of the job.

The importance of awareness which impels action needs to underline the facts that globalisation and the rapidity of change in all walks of life has seen repeated calls for transformation of schooling (Hargreaves (2006), Caldwell (2008)). Undoubtedly, the skills and knowledge which children and teachers require are becoming more complex, and the range of other issues which schools are expected to help address is growing. Curriculum change, professional learning for teacher update, expectations of the higher education sector, regulatory compliance, information technology, security, are major factors which have added pressure to the role of many Principals in Australia in this century.

Workforce and Role of Unions

Both in Canada and England, workforce reports have identified similar challenges to those that are highlighted in this paper.

The Union Voice in the United Kingdom has welcomed publication of the Workload Challenge Review Group reports by the Department for Education (DfE) but called on the Government to do more to reduce teachers' and headteachers' workloads. In the words of General Secretary Deborah Lawson (2016) 'We commend the Government for recognising that its Workload Challenge clearly demonstrated that workload in schools needed to be taken seriously, and for setting up the three working groups'.

Comparing the Ontario workforce studies report Leithwood and Azah, (2014) to that of England with the Voice Union response (Lawson, 2016), four clear answers for the short term appear to be common for both primary and secondary Principals:

- Reduce the number of departmental/Ministry initiatives schools are required to implement over time and slow down the introduction of new initiatives
- Resolve competing priorities among initiatives schools are required to implement
- Forecast future initiatives well ahead of their rollout
- Cede more autonomy to regions to determine future priorities for their schools

It is to be hoped that these initiatives will work well in the short term. However awareness needs to be raised and actions need to prepare tomorrow's Principals for very different sets of complexities and contexts. In Australia, we look to China and note their interest in our country: real estate/ land/ business interests abound. But what is happening in China's increasingly effective system of education?

Inventing the Future, not Fixing the Past

As a future-oriented institution, education cannot dwell in the past. Zhao (2015) confirms China, Hong Kong, Korea and Singapore understand very well that past accomplishments are insufficient to prepare their children for a future shaped by technology and

globalisation. They recognise the strengths of their traditional education systems, culture and values, but are unafraid of challenging changing and even abandoning them in order to create new education needed for the future.

He emphasises that to meet the challenges of the future, Asian educators need more than can be measured with test scores in a few academic subjects. Instead they need creative, innovative and responsible individuals with the capacity for, and interest in, life-long learning, effective communication, productive collaboration and proactive social engagement. They need future citizens to be socially adept, emotionally sound, psychologically healthy and physically fit. Thus, he says that Asian educators have been working to broaden definitions of outcomes and develop policies and practices to transform their education systems in order to achieve these goals.

In contrast, he believes that Australia is moving in the opposite direction - towards centralised and prescriptive curricula, more emphasis on standardised testing, narrowing the definition of educational outcomes and reducing student choices. Meanwhile, Asian education systems are undoubtedly orientated to the future – the same future that faces Western education systems and the same one we are inviting tomorrow's Principals to lead!

The message is coming through clearly from Zhao (2015) Caldwell (2014) Hargreaves (2014) Leithwood (2014) and others, that when speaking about leadership of schools, we must make the role of Principal such that the right people will be inspired by this unique role in our society. Greg Whitby, the executive director of Catholic schools in Parramatta, reports that the principal of its newest school would not necessarily be a career teacher, but rather someone who was a "bit of an entrepreneur" who will "make connections and manage relationships". "We are looking for people who understand the nature of learning and teaching but we are not limiting ourselves to someone who may have just been a principal for several years. There might be people who have been working in related industries."⁵ The College website advertises a realistic question: *Are you the leader of our Next Generation School?* ⁶ Perhaps this is a question which might well be

⁵ Sydney Morning Herald, May 24, 2016

⁶ Accessed from Diocese of Parramatta : <http://www.parra.catholic.edu.au/st-lukes-catholic-college>

posed for consideration and discussion by present and future Principals, but they will need capacity and holistic support, if they are able to answer 'yes'.

Summary⁷

Principal Work cannot remain as it is. Short term 'fixes' are no longer appropriate. Substantial research indicated above, is challenging us to re-appraise how we lead education, so that every child has access to the best possible future.

It is strongly evidenced in the literature that the work of the principal is intensifying in the extremely complex contexts of their present work environments. This is a situation for immediate action to relieve some of this pressure. Not only are present pressures affecting health and wellbeing, but our present leaders are bogged down in administration, leaving neither time nor energy for higher order strategy and planning. The advice of Caldwell (2014), the warning of Zhao (2015), and the initiative of Whitby (2016) together with other substantial reports, make a case for concern: what has to happen for these issues to be addressed?

Given that the OECD reports that 'many countries are facing decreasing numbers of applications for principals positions'(2009:9), there would seem an obvious lack of interest shown in principalship as a career option for teacher leaders. However, four points emerge as offering it as a more palatable choice:

1. Generate excitement about leading teaching and learning within a culture of innovation and possibilities.
2. Work to reconstruct the unique role of principal, taking note of system leadership as a critical component of the role
3. Re-assess remuneration packages for principals to better reflect the level of responsibility demanded of the role in 2016 and beyond

⁷ Each of the 4 points in the summary is supported by literature already mentioned in the body of the document.

4. Authentic distributed leadership has made significant contribution to school organisation. Senior leadership (often present principal class) might assume new accountability for deep leadership in their areas of responsibility.

Action planning to address the above areas would be well informed by the current research of Caldwell (the soon to be released, *The Autonomy Premium*) and the work of Zhao, Hargreaves, Whitby and others mentioned throughout this document.

There is opportunity to invent the future, and we cannot keep trying to fix the past. The role and prominence of the Principal is key to this endeavour.

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