

CROSSING THE LINE: How accomplished teachers made the transition from classroom to school leadership

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There is a compelling logic in the notion that our most accomplished teachers should progress to formal positions of school leadership as principals and school executive. It is a logic implicit in statements of career stage professional standards and accreditation frameworks. After all, one might argue, the very skills of being a good classroom teacher- a focus on student learning; the capacity to develop teams; ongoing professional learning; good parent relations and so forth- are fundamental to whole-school leadership. In recent years this “compelling logic” has been given the increased impetus of a considerable research base. (See, for instance, McKinsey and Company, 2007; 2010).

All of that is not to say, of course, that good teachers automatically make good principals given the development necessary to do the job effectively. It does however raise the question of what we can learn from accomplished teachers who have made that transition. In an education world currently dominated by a large scale issues and analyses, there is also a place for stories that are personal and local.

It was these thoughts that motivated a study of 15 teachers (identified from a cohort of some 243 primary and secondary teachers) who were acknowledged as being accomplished in their classroom practice by being recipients of the *NSW Quality Teaching Award*. These awards are adjudicated on the basis of professional standards describing accomplished teaching and validated by way of professional learning portfolios and observations of classroom practice. As such, the group provided a rather unique sample worthy of study.

The stories that were gathered from one-to-one reflective interviews based on open-ended questions recounted the transition that each person had made as they “crossed the line” from the classroom door to the wider world of educational leadership. Intensely personal and autobiographical, and local in their focus, they provide an important counterpoint in the literature to exhortations as to what school leaders ought to do in developing the leadership capabilities of others; to lamenting the supply of potential school leaders; or to suggesting strategies and programs for succession at a time of demographic change. They describe what it is that this sample of teachers actually did do. As the researcher, I was interested in listening to their stories, and through a constant comparative methodology, identifying from the transcripts common themes that emerged. I also shared my initial findings with the participants in the study and invited further comment. As it eventuated, the common themes that emerged were far greater than any differences. What then was learnt?

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Getting started

Few respondents had any leadership ambitions while in the classroom. Being a school principal simply was not on the radar. Few, if any, had any real understanding as to what it is that principals do while in the classroom. Respondents to a person acknowledged a genuine love of classroom teaching as their prime focus.

Turning points

An interest in career path progression had been provoked, motivated and supported primarily by “significant others” in the life of the teacher rather than by the teacher themselves. Significant others included principals, system administrators such as school education directors, and QTA personnel who recognised leadership potential. Respondents were “nudged” into thinking about their leadership potential and given opportunities to develop leadership skills by these significant others. This “nudge” factor is consistent with a previous finding that nomination for a *NSW Quality Teaching Award* was seldom motivated by the recipients themselves but rather at the suggestion of others such as principals, colleagues and sometimes parents and students. (McCulla, Dinham and Scott, 2007). In return, respondents viewed these significant others as “mentors” although no formal mentoring relationship existed.

Road maps

The transition from classroom to non-classroom based positions of leadership was characterised more by serendipity than any deliberate strategy or plan for career path progression. Respondents were motivated for the most part by the teaching and learning aspects of the leadership roles they took up rather than their perceived status.

Finding the right school

A key motivating factor was the degree of “fit” between the teacher’s self perception and the perceived needs of a school community. In this sense, the school was seen to “find the right person” rather than the converse. School choice and career path progression were also strongly influenced by gender and biographical factors. Gender-based issues could also be seen to be exerting an influence on some female respondents impacting on mobility with school choice being restricted to certain geographic locations because of familial ties. The most prominent factor impacting on upward mobility of a number of primary respondents was a predisposition to make choices that kept their professional work anchored in classroom practice. For most, this oriented their leadership roles to smaller rather than larger schools often combining teaching with the principalship.

While some principals were highly supportive of career mobility, other principals were not. This could be put down to varying combinations of the “tall poppy syndrome”; the need to provide stability in their own school by not losing good staff; or the perception that there was a “right” way to work your way up through the various promotion positions, as they themselves had done, and short-cuts or fast tracking were not to be encouraged.

The classroom skills that had been demonstrated in attaining a state award for quality teaching-student-centredness; problem solving; ongoing professional learning; capacity to build interpersonal relationships with parents and community- all stood the respondents in good stead as they moved into leadership roles in smaller school environments and in one sense became extensions of their classroom teaching activities.

Learning how to be a Principal

Accomplished teachers also learnt from other principals who appeared to be less comfortable in their roles, a factor the respondents put down to choosing the role for its perceived status value; the school for its geographic location; or perceiving the appointment as a stepping stone to a larger school in a pre-determined career path conceived at the expense of focusing on teaching and learning as well as student-parent-community relationships in the context at hand.

The professional learning required to undertake the leadership role was developed through a virtual tapestry of activity that included various combinations of employer-provided professional development courses, professional networks, personal learning initiatives, and some exposure to postgraduate study. Employer-provided programs were particularly valued.

Postgraduate study featured more prominently than might have been expected as an important factor in many of the responses although this was influenced by the extent to which tertiary study was perceived by the respondent to be valued by the employing authority. Self-motivation was therefore a key driving force in undertaking tertiary study.

Foremost among the professional learning opportunities that were valued were the informal mentoring relationships developed particularly with other principals or other senior non-school based personnel. Once in the role, these relationships continued to be highly valued with regard to just-in-time learning needs associated with managing the school.

Letting go

The focus on quality teaching in the classroom and pursuing this as a principal in smaller school environments, somewhat ironically, may also act as an inhibitor in developing aspirations to be principal of larger schools and developing the differing skills and attributes that requires. Some accomplished teachers struggled to let go of the sense of control that comes from good classroom teaching practice, and the direct rewards and personal fulfilment that come from feedback of

students, parents and community, and were learning how to move to the more distributive forms of leadership that larger school environments require.

The structure of primary schooling in Australia allows for a wider variety of leadership opportunities to be experienced in small and large schools than secondary schooling where the career path is more clearly defined through faculty structures, head of department and deputy principal roles. Teaching principals in smaller primary schools saw themselves as “have the best of both worlds” in this regard, experiencing what it is like to be a principal while, despite the workload, also teaching.

Professional recognition

Being the recipient of an award for quality teaching was beneficial in that the recipient in a leadership role felt that they had credibility, and were seen by others to have credibility, in setting high expectations for teacher performance and student learning outcomes. Being the recipient of an award also provided the basis and credibility for challenging underperforming teachers for a number of respondents.

Other than in the setting of high expectations, the tangible value of the award to career path progression was variable depending on the context in which promotion was being sought. In some contexts this tangible expression of accomplished teaching was valued and acknowledged; in others this was less the case. Recipients of the award continued to value it a personal level for the reflective capacity on professional practice and personal affirmation it provided.

Personal and professional growth

Significant areas of new learning in the principal role included how to work with professional colleagues as staff and adult learners; how to manage school finances; how to “de-centre” from being the dominant force within the classroom in the interests of building collegial team relationships among staff and providing leadership for others; how to manage different forms of collegial relationships with staff to those that existed while teaching as a peer; meeting staff expectations of the principal’s role... The use of professional standards for leadership did not feature in the progression although several respondents acknowledged that more use was likely to be made of them in the future.

Professional networks were the key driving forces underpinning the transition to leadership. These professional networks were highly influential in further developing informal mentoring relationships as accomplished classroom teachers first spread their interests beyond the school and later took over principal roles themselves.

Leadership and succession

The reflective comments provided by accomplished teachers on advice that might be given to younger teachers contemplating school leadership reflected a number of the findings above. Accomplished teachers now in principal roles were completing the cycle putting into effect the strategies they had come to value for the development of younger teachers whom they viewed as having leadership potential.

What it all means

The study suggested that the journey to the principalship for the most part is deeply personal, biographical, incremental and developmental rather than pre-determined, lock-step or even aspirational. If this is indeed the case, it places far more weight than hitherto on the quality of the social networks with which the teacher is involved professionally. This is not to underplay the importance of an employer-developed succession strategies and their related professional development programs preparing teachers for the principalship and supporting them within it. These are, of course, essential. Rather, based on the findings of the study, it is suggest that policy developers and program planners need to take into consideration the social, inter-personal and relational dynamics in the design of their programs placing just as much weight on them and the learning cultures they provide as they would on the content and intentions of the program itself.

Social networks that stimulate, support and sustain and are consistent with Capra's (2002) analysis of schools and school systems as "living systems" that are interconnected by way of cohesive diversity rather than mechanical alignment. There is therefore, according to Fink (2010, p.9), an interplay and a necessary point of balance between "design" (usually defined in terms of government policy, plans and structures) and "the innate human urge for emergence" to be free, creative and liberated. The challenge at all levels is to find the balance.

The same too can be said of mentoring relationships. Fink (2010, pp128-130) has argued that, regardless of the general approach, mentoring and coaching in recent years have become important parts of virtually every important leadership development model. He notes that, with time availability the most pressing factor, the most successful mentoring programs appear to be emergent, evolving as functions of collegial relationships rather than to be designed at a distance or even imposed, regardless of the financial support. The study has verified this observation.

The findings also resonate with other insights from the literature. Again Fink (2010, pp.101-103) notes through interview data from principals in American, Canadian and British contexts that, when asked about where the idea of moving up the ladder started for them, most pointed to a motivational leader who "stoked their ambitions" as young teachers. As this study also revealed, a number also referred to dysfunctional leaders who made them think "I can do better than that". Many had been encouraged to take on challenging leadership roles as teachers with success inside and outside of their schools.

As Fink (2010, p.143) also makes clear, transition to leadership and the succession challenge is more than just recruiting “warm bodies to resolve the mathematical mismatch between leadership aspirants and available jobs. Educational leaders, regardless of their roles, must see themselves as leaders of learning- their own; their teachers’ and other staff; and of course their students”. These attributes were well demonstrated by the respondents in this study.

Fink (2010, xxi) has observed too that, in many education jurisdictions, there is no shortage in the number of people who think they can run a school to be able to fill positions, but the “succession challenge” is to find the right person for the right place at the right time for the right reasons. The dynamics of matching the right person with the right kind of school environment was an interesting finding of this study, not without its disappointments, as these teachers sought their first principal’s roles.

What is also of interest in this study is the observation that the number of accomplished teachers who had actually made the transition to formal positions of leadership was relatively small among the total number who had been recipients of the *NSW Quality Teaching Award*. It begs the question as to why this is so suggesting from this study it may well be a combination of the attractiveness of classroom teaching on one hand while, on the other, a lack of knowledge of programs and developmental opportunities that are available. It could also be a lack of encouragement, mentoring or principal support of the kind that provides insights into what it is that schools leaders do, opportunities to experience leadership roles and the positive aspects of being a leader. That said, there is nothing at all inherently wrong of course in wanting to continue to be a good classroom teacher. The problem resides in situations where even a fledgling interest is not encouraged or potential is not realised. Our research shows that quite often our good teachers do not realise how good they are. (McCulla, Dinham and Scott, 2007)

The findings of the study were consistent with those of Fink (2010, p. 140) who argues that developing leaders of learning takes time, resources, and energy because prospective leaders require:

- the opportunity to undertake significant and challenging activities early in their careers that “stretched” them intellectually and professionally
- leadership development opportunities that enabled them to meet these challenges
- supportive mentors who assisted them as they met their challenges
- the opportunity to observe and learn from powerful models of successful educational leadership (and from some negative examples)
- feedback on their performance that was honest and constructive.

Working from the assumption that our accomplished teachers have the potential to become accomplished school leaders, it is interesting to explore what might now be done to encourage more of these teachers to at least consider formal positions of leadership. It is a career path transition that is implicit in all standards-referenced frameworks for teacher professional development and, more recently, school leadership regardless of whether it is actually taken up or not. Where should our emphases be in the mix of employer developed programs, professional development courses, postgraduate studies...? Or does it really matter so long as the inter-

personal and relational dimensions underpinning these are sufficiently robust? Is diversity in these tapestries of learning indeed a strength?

It has been important to learn from this sample of teachers as it is one of the first groups to make the transition from the classroom to school leadership as principal with a backdrop of working within a professional standards framework in the Australian context. Set in the one education jurisdiction, it provides a local case study of career transition and succession to leadership to be considered with studies elsewhere in highlighting what enables and what inhibits that transition.

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Referencing

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