Policy for all? The impact of centrally developed, universally applied policy on decision-making in Western Australian public schools

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ABSTRACT

In many organisations, policies and procedures are developed to be followed and complied with by all managers and staff in each branch, geographical location and community. These centrally developed governance frameworks are deemed to apply to all decision-making regardless of contextual circumstances that apply locally. Government schools are no exception. In Western Australia (WA) principals of public schools are provided with guidance for their decision-making by centrally developed educational policy and procedures included on a regulatory framework. Policy writers within the central office have worked under the assumption that policies and procedures can be developed that will apply universally to all schools and circumstances.

This paper considers the impact of this assumption on risk-taking in decision-making by principals in schools that have different characteristics within the school community. The paper reflects on a study of principals in a stratified random sample of 253 WA public schools. It was found that principals of schools where local circumstances were different, including geographical and cultural factors, were more likely to take risks in decision-making. As a consequence these principals were not compliant with the Departmental regulatory framework.

Interviews with principals also indicated that policies created centrally were often not applicable to schools in remote locations or with different cultural characteristics, such as high proportions of Indigenous students or students from a wide range of cultural backgrounds with English as a second language. The dilemma for principals is to be able to translate locally identified needs into a local educational program within a school and simultaneously comply with all State and Commonwealth departmental requirements.

GOVERNANCE IN EDUCATION

Since the 1960's the political climate of Western nations and demands of cultural minorities for increased participation have contributed to the rise of school-based decision-making and management as an administrative strategy in education. In a comparison of 19 countries, the 2004 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report found that in 14 countries, decisions were being made at a more decentralised level in 2003 than was evident in 1998. Karstanje (1999) reported that Western, Central and Eastern European countries were moving toward decentralisation and deregulation to allow schools to respond flexibly to local or regional needs and circumstances. Also in China there has been a strong trend to decentralisation in educational governance (Mok, 2001).

In contrast, Australia was found to be one of the countries with the most centralised educational decision-making (Caldwell, 2006). This is despite research and government reports, such as the Karmel Report (1973), recommending that Australian schools move towards a more decentralised form of management. A commitment to decentralisation and devolution of authority in education was made at

a national level following the election of the Australian Labor Party in 1983 (Caldwell, 1990) and national and state government initiatives over recent years are still tending to move in this direction (Eacott, 2009; Council for Australian Federation, 2007; Department of Education and Training, 2009). However, an emphasis on standards-based accountability, such as is occurring in Australia, reinforces the responsibility of schools and principals to conform with and achieve institutionally set goals.

Corporate governance, by which organisations are directed and controlled, includes the processes of leadership, control, accountability and ethics in the organisation. A key aspect of the governance structures in public sector agencies, including schools, are the Commonwealth and State legislative frameworks that determine the agency mission and guide the implementation of programs, and associated organisational structures. Within the WA Department of Education, directors and executives provide leadership and management to link Departmental strategic plans to broader Commonwealth and State legislation and strategic directions, and to ensure compliance to public sector standards and ethics across the public school system. Barrett (1999) emphasised the importance for accountability of clear designation of roles and responsibilities of each of the participants in the governance framework. Accountability for achievement of outcomes and maintenance of standards within each school is the responsibility of the principal as plans are put into effect in each individual school under the principal's leadership. The requirements and responsibilities for principals are documented in policy and procedures documents that comprise the regulatory framework. The regulatory framework of policies is a key accountability structure that assists in managing risk and maintaining consistent quality and standards in service delivery across a wide range of schools in the state of Western Australia.

In Western Australia, principals are provided with guidance for their decision-making by centrally developed educational policy and procedures included on the regulatory framework. This approach to corporate governance assumes that policy positions and their impact will be consistent across a range of contexts. Policy writers within the central office work under the assumption that policies and procedures can be developed that will apply universally to all schools and circumstances. As a consequence of these assumptions, policies and procedures are developed to be followed and complied with by all managers and staff in each school type, in each geographical location without regard to contextual issues such as students' needs or community expectations. The policy and procedures documents are deemed to provide an efficient framework for decision-making regardless of the contextual circumstances that apply locally. Such a view aligns with the position of Compte and Durkheim (Whiteley A, 2004; Bullock, Stallybrass & Trombley, 1988) where universal laws are invariant across societal contexts. Proponents of decentralised decision-making have reacted against this approach to provide an alternative perspective of society and organisations (Calas & Smircich, 1999). Eacott (2009, p.2) argues that the concept of educational leadership needs "to move beyond modernist thinking and embrace the complexity of ever shifting cultural, social, historical and political relationships".

Consistency and universalism have been lauded as critical aims in public education to ensure equity of access and opportunity for all students (Jamieson & Wikely, 2001). Compliance with universally required policy positions in education and schools promotes this ideal. However, as Jamieson and Wikely (2001) point out, this view is ideologically incompatible with the paradigm of responding to the individual needs of children. The current educational culture is dominated by the forces of managerialism and standards which creates a dilemma for schools in trying to make decisions to meet the learning needs of their individual school whilst meeting the externally imposed requirements of these bureaucratic influences (McMahon, 2001). The Federalist Paper (Council for Australian Federation, 2007) recognised that Commonwealth and State regulation, in addition to operational policies within school systems, impose an administrative burden on schools. Eacott (2009) takes this

further, and states that these government policy initiatives, including professional standards, league tables, and school-based management provide evidence of the politicisation of education. These government agendas and policy initiatives place pressure on principals to comply with external requirements that may be contrary to identified strategies for education at the school level.

To address issues such as client satisfaction, social justice, and equity of service provision, the Department of Education, as the principal provider of education across the state, needs to ensure that services are provided in areas and geographic regions that are not commercially viable and where no other providers exist. The quality of the process of assessing the needs in such areas and provision of educational services that meet these identified local needs, is fundamental to the success of schools and educational strategies put in place by the Department. Information gathered through consultations with peak bodies, local community organisations and community members is a valuable resource for planning to determine local needs. Where local stakeholders are aware and accepting of decision-making processes there are opportunities for an improved contribution to the planning and development of services that begin to address the issues of client satisfaction, justice, and equity of service provision.

The dilemma for principals is to be able to translate the locally identified needs into a local educational program within a school and simultaneously comply with all State and Commonwealth departmental requirements. Transparency and promotion of decision-making processes within the school and broader community are critically important to achieve the balance of local input with external requirements. Improved transparency of the use of information can enhance both the public sector's on-going contribution to education and the acceptance of new educational strategies within the community. This is a component of corporate governance of particular significance to the public sector. Public awareness of the performance of schools promotes community expectations of the quality of services delivered. Communities have an expectation that outcomes achieved across schools will be equitable across all schools regardless of geographical or other local factors. The regulatory framework is in place to assure consistency in application of policy and procedures, but a limitation may be that consistency in inputs may constrain decision-making by principals and the development of innovation in service improvement that would achieve more equitable outcomes for students.

STAKEHOLDER IMPACTS ON DECISION-MAKING BEHAVIOUR

The move to decentralisation of governance in the public sector, and in particular in schools has been noted in many countries as part of programs of economic reform and globalisation. Although the rationale for such governance changes may be initially driven largely by an economic business case, a subsidiary outcome of shifting control from central hierarchies to local authorities or communities can be to make service delivery more responsive to local user needs. Bardhan (2002) suggested it provides an opportunity for increased participation in governance and decision-making for otherwise disenfranchised communities.

In the context of decision-making by school principals, these stakeholders include parents and community members in the school locality. The influence of corporate governance mechanisms on parents and community members and their involvement in decision-making is reflected in the educational literature. It is long established that having a shared vision and goals for a school has the potential to unite a school and its community (Bennis & Nanus, 1985) and studies in several national contexts have shown that involvement of stakeholders, such as community members, is associated with higher achieving schools (Hallinger & Heck, 1999; Anderson & Minke, 2007). Fullan (2007, p.189) goes further to claim that the research shows that "the closer the parent is to the education of the child, the greater the impact on child development and educational achievement" and cites a range of educational

research studies to support this conclusion. The model of parental involvement developed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (in Anderson & Minke, 2007) links involvement in their children's education with student outcomes. Parents, as their child's first educator, have knowledge about their children's skills and learning needs and a vested interest in their educational achievement, so such research findings are intuitively reasonable. Laycock (2001) reports success in a community education program in an area of second and third generation unemployment that was well supported by the local community and emphasises the importance of acknowledging the community contribution as an integral component of planning and provision of education. There is consensus across the literature on the importance of the role of parents and community in contributing to the educational outcomes of schools. It is less clear to what extent and how this occurs in different communities.

The relationship between the organisational structure and administration of a school and its broader environment and community is significant in the decision-making process. Hallinger and Heck (1999) indicate that the extent of collaboration and engagement with the community are important because community expectations and beliefs influence the attitudes of principals. The information perspective described by Hoy and Miskel (2005) treats the external environment as a critical source of information for decision-makers in schools. They argue that problems for principals can arise due to uncertainty about factors in the external environment.

An important factor in the external environment that impacts on principal collaboration and engagement with the community is the location of the school and characteristics of the community it serves. Contingency theory (Fiedler, 1967; Fidler, 2001; Morgan, 2007) suggests that leadership needs to be tailored to the circumstances and the external context including where the school is located. Minor (2004) argues that in education institutions that historically cater to a black student population, contextual understanding is essential in determining the appropriateness of governance structures and decision-making practices. Dalton, Fawcett and West-Burnham (2001) claim that the reconceptualisation of the relationship between schools and their external environment is one of the most significant changes in education this century. They express this as "many schools have been in their communities but not of their communities" (Dalton, Fawcett & West-Burnham, 2001, p.145). These studies reflect a common view of the importance of involving community stakeholders in school governance processes. Decision-making processes that are based on local school sites can enhance the influence and contribution of stakeholders and community (Bauer & Bogotch, 2006).

Where a school is located in a community that differs from the norm, the expectations and needs of the community are more likely to be unique to that particular community. Fullan (2007) cites ethnicity and poverty/affluence as two examples of critical characteristics of educational communities that need to be considered in making policy decisions. Differences could be due to factors including geographical location or cultural influence such as would occur in remotely located communities. A study by Petrakis (2005) considered cultural values and idiosyncrasies as one of the factors impacting on individual risk propensity in decision-making. This view is supported by research in the United Kingdom that traced the development of a centrally advocated approach to school management and compared it to the reality of practice in schools. Levacic, Glover, Bennett and Crawford (1999) found that in schools with unique circumstances, such as in socially deprived communities, there were limitations in the use of the centralised management approach. Similarly, Karstanje (1999) indicates that in Western, Central and Eastern European countries there is recognition that local needs and circumstances do not allow educational problems to be solved by central governance at a distance. These findings imply that the need for decentralised decision-making may differ dependent on the characteristics of the local community and school.

In communities where the cultural background differs from that of the principal, the risk propensity and perception of stakeholders may differ from that of principals such that greater input from the community is required to reach agreement on decisions. Studies in rural decision-making have considered the impact of risk and uncertainty. Bacic, Bregt, and Rossiter (2006) posit that in these circumstances incomplete information is one of the main constraints in decision-making. A principal in a rural or remote school, with a large proportion of Indigenous students, may face greater constraints in their decision-making due to lack of information about the expectations and needs of the community of the school. In addition, the expectations and needs of such a community are less likely to align well to policies that have been developed centrally to apply to generally applicable circumstances. It is therefore posited that there will be greater influence on principals from the parent and community stakeholders in these communities to take risky decisions in order to meet their differing needs and expectations. Such involvement is also required to attain lasting change.

REVIEW OF DECISION-MAKING BY WA PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Napoli (2003) makes the point that management is expected to make the organisation predictable and stable by putting systems in place. This is what the management of the Department of Education is doing via the regulatory framework. Legislation and regulations are necessary to allow organisations to have "a licence to operate" (Napoli, 2003, p.14). In the case of schools these laws are provided in the *School Education Act 2000* and *Regulations 2001*. However, in addition to these, over 140 departmental policies have been developed to further guide the decision-making and action of principals in government schools. Whiteley, A (2003) indicates that the language of rules, standards and procedures was introduced and institutionalised in industrial and later in service industries with the assumption that they would be interpreted similarly by employees as by the employers who wrote them. However, lack of consistency in interpretation of policy on the regulatory framework was found to be an issue impacting local school decision-making in Western Australian schools (Trimmer, 2003; 2011).

A review of the regulatory framework in WA schools (Trimmer, 2003) found that a number of principals had operated outside the mandatory policy requirements in circumstances where, in their professional judgment, it was impossible to comply with the policy because of local circumstances. Instead, they based their decision on the intent of known Departmental goals. Only six percent, of a sample of 71 principals interviewed, indicated that they would always comply with policy in all circumstances. The majority of principals cited instances where they had used professional discretion to make decisions that were contrary to mandatory policy and procedures. These principals maintained that this was necessary and provided explanations that highlighted the existence of specific circumstances that made compliance difficult or inappropriate (Trimmer, 2003; 2011). They also provided details of their decisions, that they deemed the most appropriate in the circumstances, and the subsequent outcomes. From the perspective of public sector management, lack of compliance leaves these principals and the Department exposed to risk as they are in breach of mandatory policy and are therefore open to disciplinary action should an untoward outcome eventuate. The Department is also at risk as they face public and Parliamentary scrutiny in a circumstance where there is no due process to account for the decision-making or action that was taken. Starr (2008) indicates that consideration of risk in schools "has risen dramatically in stakes and prominence".

Interviews with principals revealed that situations where compliance had not been possible occurred on an on-going basis where local circumstances, including geographical and cultural factors, were such that the population of students or the community had significantly different characteristics than other schools. Policies and procedures developed centrally within the Department are intended to provide the most effective means of achieving the required outcomes in all schools and circumstances. Where specific school and community circumstances, including cultural and geographical factors, appear to

demand a unique response, principals may make decisions that are not compliant with the established policy. Seventy percent of principals indicated that they were aware of instances where compliance had not been possible given the circumstances. In such instances it was felt that compliance may have resulted in inappropriate, inefficient or ineffective outcomes. Lack of consistency in interpretation was compounded by lack of flexibility in implementation across Western Australian school districts (Trimmer, 2003; 2011).

In a further study a theoretical model of factors impacting on reasoned risk-taking in decision-making was developed (Trimmer, 2011). Data was collected through the survey of principals in 253 WA public schools. The questionnaire included measures of both attitude and behaviour of principals to determine whether reasoned risk-taking by school principals is a consequence of their perceptions of the governance mechanism of the regulatory framework, the experience of individual principals and the characteristics of key stakeholders within the school community. A stratified sample of schools was selected on the basis of district, geographical location, school type, and school size.

Demographic items were included to determine environmental and situational factors that could potentially impact on responses. These included factors such as the experience and expertise of the principal in regard to length and type of teaching and administrative experience and the type and size of school. The geographical location and ethnic composition of the school were also included as factors likely to influence the construct of "Stakeholder Influences" (Dunham et al., 1989).

A combination of Rasch and traditional statistical techniques, including structural equation modeling, were applied to test the measurement properties of the questionnaire and the hypothesised model. Rasch measurement was used to analyse the data and create a robust measurement scale. This psychometric technique provides current world best practice in the creation of linear scales in the human sciences. A factor analysis was then conducted to determine whether the items in the questionnaire were loading onto the constructs they were developed to measure. Components of the construct for *Stakeholder Characteristics* were identified that accounted for 64.4% of the total variance for the construct (Trimmer, 2011). The components included:

Component 1	Geography; cultural composition
Component 2	Seek community input as incomplete understanding
Component 3	Diversity
Component 4	Stakeholder input
Component 5	District

The hypotheses were finally tested used Partial Least Squares (PLS) structural equation modeling. This analysis provides evidence of the effect of the concepts included in the model and consequently insight into governance structures, characteristics of schools and principals that influence decision-making in schools.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of the analysis showed strong support for the model and hypotheses with principals in all types of schools with a high degree of uniqueness more likely to make decisions involving reasoned risk-taking. The results were consistent with comments made by principals in interviews (Trimmer, 2003; 2011) and align with the education literature (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Hallinger & Heck, 1999; Anderson & Minke, 2007; Fullan, 2007) on the importance of the role of parents and the school community in contributing to decision-making in schools. There are significant implications in Western Australian public schools that include many schools with highly diverse populations, and schools in remote locations catering to Indigenous students.

Implementation of a system such as the regulatory framework assumes that all principals will interpret and action the policies in a consistent way in the range of circumstances that arise across schools and regions. This approach to corporate governance is common practice across public sector organisations and is consistent with other industrial and service industries (Whiteley A, 2003). It also assumes that principals will interpret the policies similarly to the central office employers who produced them. The findings of the study provide evidence that both of these assumptions may be flawed.

The support for the effect of stakeholder characteristics on risk-taking in decision-making provides some evidence that this controlled view of governance and decision-making in this organisation does not adequately describe the behaviour of principals. It was found that stakeholder characteristics have a positive impact on risk-taking in decision-making with principals significantly more likely to engage in risk-taking where contextual factors differed from the norm. Interviews with principals also indicated that policies created centrally to be generally applicable were often not applicable to schools in remote locations or with different cultural characteristics, such as high proportions of Indigenous students or students from a wide range of cultural backgrounds where English is a second language.

To ensure the needs of individual students and the objectives of the organisation were met, principals adapted policy to meet their individual school circumstances or made a considered decision not to comply. This approach to decision-making is consistent with Napoli's (2003) view of the role of managers in organisations where managers need to change or bend the rules to ensure that decisions are made and strategies put in place to meet unforeseen and different situations. It also supports Stacey's (1996) view that managers are needed because organisations do not run according to a given set of rules, due to the interactions of members of organisations with each other and with stakeholders.

Members of the local community provide networks that assist principals in making decisions that are appropriate and fit the needs of these stakeholders and the wider community. These community networks were more often used by principals in their decision-making where schools were located in remote areas or had significant numbers of Indigenous students. In these schools principals had to consider the cultural implications of any decision if a solution or strategy was to be successful. Seddon, Angus and Poole (1990) express the view that a key impetus for increased community involvement in schooling arises from a democratic sharing of the institutionalised power in the governance of education. They argue that equitable participation and outcomes of schooling requires dissemination of power and control from current hierarchical structures to more devolved governance through school communities. These findings are also consistent with Mok (2001) who indicates that the power relationship between managers and stakeholders impacts on the process of governance in the provision of government services such as education. Research on parental involvement in education has provided evidence that where commitment and responsibility are shared between parents and the school, student educational outcomes are improved (Cavanagh & Dellar, 2003).

The findings of this study showed that in practice many principals make decisions that are non-compliant with governance structures. They make decisions based on consideration of the individual needs of students, their school and local communities in addition to, or in spite of, the requirements of the regulatory framework. This can be problematic when principals make a professional decision to take a risk and act outside mandatory policy requirements, or it restricts decision-making that may be in the best interest of outcomes for students. To avoid this dilemma the establishment of mandatory policy, applicable to all schools, should be minimised. Where it is created, policy and procedures should be developed that is enabling rather than restrictive. Such an approach would enhance the capacity of schools to make decisions that take account of the unique context of their own students and communities.

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