

Parallel leadership: A clue to the contents of the ‘black box’ of school reform.

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Abstract

The concept of parallel leadership that is introduced in this article derives from a five-year research project that was first reported in *IJEM* in 1997. Parallel leadership represents a relationship between teacher leaders and principals that is grounded in the values of mutual trust, shared directionality and allowance for individual expression. It appears to provide a leadership foundation upon which successful school reform can be built. Thus, the lid of what Hallinger and Heck have called the “black box” of school reform may have been prised open.

Keywords: School reform, Distributed leadership, Teacher leadership, Parallel leadership, Capacity building; Professional learning, Pedagogy, Culture building.

Introduction

In this paper we review the most recent outcomes of an educational research project that was first reported in the *International Journal of Educational Management* five years ago. The article on that occasion, “Teachers as leaders – an exploratory framework”, written by Crowther (1997), proposed a conceptualisation of teacher leadership that incorporated authoritative theories drawn from the field of educational administration and called for acceptance of more inclusive approaches to school-based leadership than has tended to characterise the field in the past.

This paper represents a direct extension of the research that culminated in the 1997 publication. We have subjected our initial conceptualisation of teacher leadership to detailed scrutiny in a range of case studies, which have been distinguished by successful school-based reform (Crowther, 2001). In so doing we have focussed on the interactivity of teacher leaders and administrator leaders and have generated a concept that we call “parallel leadership” as a strategy which appears to us to illuminate ways in which school-based leadership may contribute to processes of successful school reform.

The findings of our research suggest to us that the lid may finally be opening on the “black box” that has characterised much of the analysis of educational reform in recent decades. That is, a response may be in the offing to Hallinger and Heck’s provocative assertion that “the process by which administrators achieve an impact is hidden in a so-called black box. A relationship is empirically tested, but the findings reveal little about how leadership operates” (Hallinger and Heck, 1996, p. 11).

We commence the paper by outlining pertinent current literature on leadership for successful school reform. We then describe in brief the broad features of our longitudinal research project. That done, we present three key findings to emerge from the research to date. First, we present a conceptualisation of teacher leadership that suggests a significant rethinking of the educational leadership paradigm that has dominated for the past 40 years. Second, we propose and describe the new concept of parallelism. Third, we present a definitive process through which it appears that parallel leadership can influence the nature of school outcomes.

Leadership for Successful School Reform: Recent Developments.

The past decade has seen major developments in the re-conceptualisation of educational leadership for successful school reform. It could be said that such re-conceptualisation is chronically overdue.

Traditionally, school-based leadership has centered on the principalship. Some authoritative observers claim that the role of the principal has seen little change during the past century (Tyack and Honsot,

1982, in Smith and Ellet, 2000) and is ill-suited to the challenges of the emerging postindustrial society (Crowther *et al.*, 2001).

At least three developments of the past decade point to a need for concerted change in the way that school-based leadership is construed. First, serious critique of positional or authoritative leadership has generated a range of more inclusive conceptions of leadership than existed previously. Notions such as “distributed leadership” (Handy, 1996), “leadership as an organization-wide quality” (Ogawa and Bossert, 1995), “leadership of the many” (Lakomski, 1995), “community of leaders” (Senge, 1997), “role-based leadership” (Limerick *et al.*, 1998) and “co-leadership” (Heenan and Bennis, 1999) now occupy a prominent place in the educational administration literature.

A second development of the past decade concerns the establishment of a relationship, albeit tentative, between educational leadership from within the professional learning community of the school and sustained school improvement. University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers Newmann and Associates have established that the three concepts of authentic pedagogy, professional learning and capacity building are fundamental to enhanced student achievement in literacy, numeracy and other school subjects. While these researchers have not to date conceptualised what they regard as appropriate forms of leadership for successful school reform they have nevertheless made clear their view that distributed leadership is a vital ingredient (Newmann and Wehlage, 1995; King and Newmann, 2000, 2001).

In somewhat similar vein, Cuttance (2001) has observed from his Australian research that schools that sustain high levels of student achievement meet four criteria:

1. teaching, learning assessment is at the centre of the innovation;
2. the approach to innovation is holistic (i.e. whole-school);
3. a vibrant professional learning community is in evidence;
4. leadership functions and responsibilities are distributed, with teachers exercising pedagogical leadership and principals exercising strategic leadership.

Cuttance’s (2001) conclusion is consistent with the view that the total amount of leadership found in schools correlates positively with school performance (Pounder *et al.*, 1995; Ogawa and Bossert, 1995). However, as Hallinger and Heck (1996) have pointed out, the dynamics of processes that underpin the correlation in question have remained obscured from the view of researchers.

In a third development of the past decade, the leadership roles and functions of classroom teachers in processes of successful school reform have been forcefully asserted (Muncey and McQuillan, 1996;

Silins *et al.*, 1999). Indeed, US theorists Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001, p. ix) have claimed very recently that where teacher leadership is flourishing in schools:

... there is substantive reform taking place. Teacher leaders emerge within these schools to fill many roles; they join their principals as colleagues to help achieve the schools' desired goals.

These three developments represent a compelling challenge to the time-honoured notion of the principalship as the centrepiece of educational reform. But they have not had widespread effects on educational practice. Moreover, they have not been assimilated into comprehensive leadership research. Partly as a result, we believe, the contents of the metaphorical black box of educational reform have remained tantalisingly unclear.

Research Approach in Brief.

Our conceptualisations of teacher leadership and parallel leadership, and our theoretical framework for successful school reform, derive from a five-year, ongoing research-based analysis of schools in which processes of major organisational reform have been undertaken with documented success (Crowther *et al.*, 2001, in press).

The research process has been evolutionary in nature, encompassing four distinct phases. Three concepts – teacher leadership, teacher-principal relationships and the role of the principal in nurturing teacher leadership – have provided the focus of inquiry during different research phases. In phases one and two, with funding support from the Australian Research Council, a Teachers as Leaders Framework was conceptualised out of an investigation of the work of classroom teachers whose influence on their communities had won widespread acclaim. (See Chart 1 for an updated version of the framework that was presented in our 1997 article.)

The phase three research was conducted at nine sites throughout Australia as part of a large-scale research initiative funded by the Commonwealth Government of Australia and coordinated through a consortium of four universities (Cuttance, 2001). Inquiry centred on the organisational dynamics of nine schools where authoritative evidence existed of enhanced student achievement in response to the introduction of a specific school-based reform. Four questions shaped the phase three research design and method:

1. What is the nature of the school's documented improvement in student achievement?
2. What factors are perceived to be important in having facilitated the improvement in question?
3. What roles did key actors play in the operationalisation of these factors?
4. What approaches to educational leadership are implicit in participants' roles?

Data from the phase three research were subjected to comprehensive processes of analysis in focus group activities that involved members of the research team and case study participants. Two new concepts were identified from the phase three research. The first, that of “parallel leadership”, emerged as a meaningful representation of leadership processes that had been documented in the case studies. The second concept to emerge is processual in nature and in our view provides a clue to the contents of Hallinger and Heck’s mysterious black box. This concept is presented in Figure 1.

Phase four, still underway, has involved us in exploring in detail the dynamics of the organisational processes that are explicit in Figure 1. Most recently, data were obtained from an evaluation workshop at the end of 2001 with 25 phase four schools that had worked across a period of a year with the concepts and processes that are elucidated in Figure 1. These data suggest the general validity of Figure 1 and have enabled us to begin to illuminate its essential features.

Research Findings.

Research Finding One: The Teachers as Leaders Framework.

Chart One outlines the characteristics of teacher leaders that we observed in our Phase One and Phase Two research. The Teachers as Leaders Framework centres on the work, rather than the personal characteristics, of a cohort of teacher practitioners whose impacts on their schools and communities had won the acclaim of colleagues and principals. Our definition of teacher leadership is as follows:

Teacher leadership is behaviour that facilitates principled pedagogical action toward whole-school success. It derives from the distinctive power of teaching to shape meaning for children, youth and adults. It contributes to enhanced quality of community life in the long term.

The Teachers as Leaders Framework implies a correlation between teacher leadership and educational success. In exploring the dynamics of teachers’ leadership roles in successful school projects in Phase Two of the research, it became evident that the relationship in question could not be fully understood or appreciated in isolation from the work of principals. Indeed, in none of our Phase Two case studies was teacher leadership found to flourish independently of the principalship. The validity of the Teachers as Leaders Framework and the integrity of the teacher leader – principal relationship in successful school reform have both been affirmed by the subsequent Phase Three and Phase Four research undertakings.

Chart I: The Teachers as Leaders Framework.

Teacher leaders:.....

Convey convictions about a “better world”, by, for example:

- articulating a positive future for students
- showing a genuine interest in students’ lives
- contributing to an image of teachers as “professionals who make a difference”
- gaining respect and trust in the broader community
- demonstrating tolerance and reasonableness in difficult situations

Strive for authenticity in their teaching, learning and assessment practices, by, for example:

- creating learning experiences related to students’ needs
- connecting teaching, learning and assessment to students’ futures
- seeking deep understanding of tacit teaching and learning processes
- valuing teaching as a key profession in shaping meaning systems

Facilitate communities of learning through organization-wide processes, by, for example:

- encouraging a shared, schoolwide approach to pedagogy (teaching, learning and assessment)
- approaching professional learning as consciousness-raising about complex issues
- facilitating understanding across diverse groups while also respecting individual differences
- synthesizing new ideas out of colleagues’ dialogue and activities

Confront barriers in the school’s culture and structures, by, for example:

- “testing the boundaries” rather than accepting the status quo
- engaging administrators as potential sources of assistance and advocacy
- accessing political processes in and out of the school

standing up for children, especially marginalized or disadvantaged individuals or groups

Translate ideas into sustainable systems of action, by, for example:

- organizing complex tasks effectively
- maintaining focus on issues of importance
- nurturing networks of support
- managing issues of time and pressure through priority-setting

Nurture a culture of success, by, for example:

- acting on opportunities for others to gain success and recognition
- adopting a “no blame” attitude when things go wrong
- creating a sense of community identity and pride.

Research Finding Two: The Concept of Parallelism.

We have conceptualised the distinctive leadership phenomenon involving principals and teacher leaders that we observed during the phase three research as “parallelism”. We have found that parallel leadership manifests differently in different situations, reflecting both the wide range of contexts in which schools are located and the diversity of personal qualities and philosophical orientations which practising educators brought to their work. But the relationship between teacher leaders and principals that we observed in all nine phase three case studies encompassed three distinct qualities: mutual trust and respect; a sense of shared directionality; and allowance for individual expression. These are qualities that are associated with the concept of “parallelism” in a range of contexts drawn from the humanities and sciences, including philosophy, mathematics, biology, music and literature.

Detailed interviews with participants in phase three case studies, as well as with other members of the nine school communities, confirmed the importance of these three core values in the relationships of teacher leaders and their principals in processes of sustained school success. The thumbnail sketch in

Appendix 2 illustrates this relationship in one case study situation. Our definition of parallel leadership is as follows:

Parallel leadership is a process whereby teacher leaders and their principals engage in collective action to build capacity. It embodies mutual respect, shared purpose and allowance for individual expression.

The following brief quotes from our most recent research (phase four) illustrate teacher leaders' perceptions of the impacts of parallelism in their workplaces:

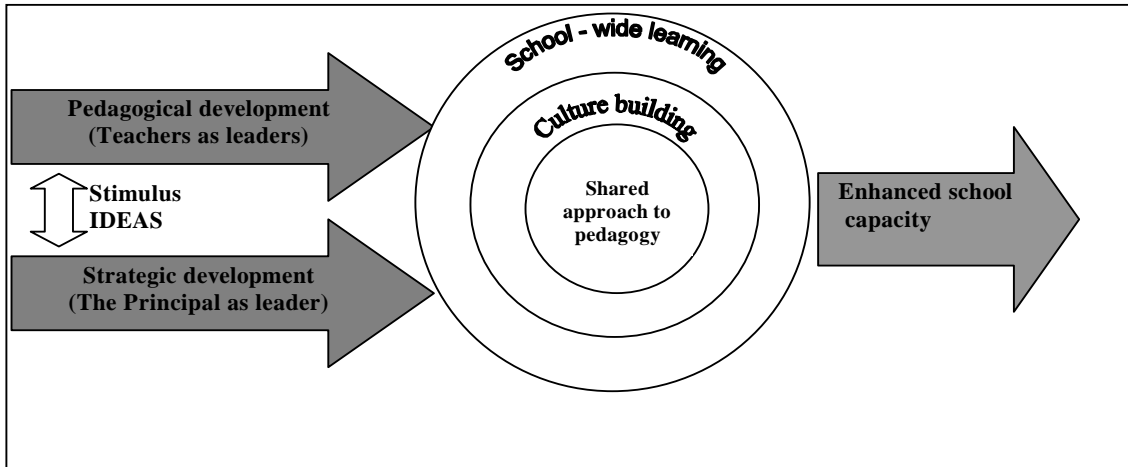
Parallel leadership facilitates an environment that acknowledges and encourages others' expertise, a shared vision and a professional learning community. Parallel leadership grows out of a culture that thrives when all members of the school community are valued It ensures that collective responsibility is taken for enhancing teaching and learning

While the concept of parallelism is consistent with emerging notions of leadership as a distributed organisational process, it differs in one fundamental regard from most educational conceptions of distributed leadership. That is, it asserts that the leadership functions of teacher leaders are equivalent in value to those of principals. Thus, the notion of parallelism in school-based leadership appears to us to herald the emergence of a potentially exciting new era for the teaching profession.

Research Finding Three: How Parallelism Works to Enhance School Outcomes

Our most recently completed research, involving case studies such as those represented in Chart Two, has focused in part on ways that parallel leadership might be associated with school processes that appear to facilitate enhanced student outcomes. Our conclusions point to the importance of three intersecting processes, namely schoolwide professional learning, schoolwide pedagogy and culture building. Figure One represents our conceptualization of the dynamic interplay between parallel leadership and these processes in the case studies of successful school reform that we have observed.

Figure 1: Inside the “black box”: parallel leadership and enhanced school outcomes



The thumbnail sketch of Bordertown in Chart Two illustrates the essential features of these processes.

Chart II: Thumbnail Sketch –Bordertown State High

The findings of the school surveys were devastating to many of the teachers of the school even though not entirely unexpected. Staff morale was assessed as very low, the community’s perceptions of the school were overwhelmingly negative and student achievement was largely regarded as unsatisfactory. Could a positive future be created out of such a negative scenario? Perhaps not, but the deputy principal and a team of volunteer teachers who formed a school revitalization team felt they had to make a concerted effort before conceding defeat.

The school’s location in a medium sized town at the centre of a thriving rural community did not make the task any easier. Community leaders had a reputation for entrepreneurship and assertiveness and viewed the school as inadequate if it could not match their achievements in the corporate world. Academically inclined students frequently left home to attend expensive private schools, contributing yet further to a school image as second-class.

But within two years of the administration of the surveys, the school had become a State Showcase Award winner, nationally known for its “Bordertown Pedagogical Framework”. Teacher morale had improved dramatically, the school had become a key source of community pride, links with the cotton industry for vocational training programs had been formalized and some students attending private schools had returned to the local high school. Aspects of student achievement school wide had improved noticeably, in particular the literacy level of boys. Overall retention rates of students into the senior years had risen well above the state norm.

Three leadership dimensions underpinned the revitalization process at Bordertown – a dynamic, ambitious deputy principal who in essence assumed the role of principal (the actual principal was near retirement), supportive facilitators and critical friends from a nearby University and a core team of five teachers. This core team consisted of two department heads, one of whom emerged as the central catalyst and integrator in the overall process; one was a beginning teacher and two were young women who had married into the local community and foresaw spending their lives there.

The revitalization process proceeded on a number of interlocking fronts – re-visioning, community-building, creation and trialing of schoolwide pedagogy in a range of year levels and subject areas, and concerted professional and public promotion of the school. Teacher leaders were integrally involved in each of these processes, but particularly in the generation of the school’s vision and the related Pedagogical Framework. This framework is as follows:

Our vision: a school community for the 21st century –

Together we achieve:

- life long learners
- an enriched community
- flexible pathways to the future

continued...

Our definition of school wide pedagogy:

- Self awareness: *What does this experience tell me about myself?*
- Critical reflection: *Why am I doing this?*
- Personal development: *How has this contributed to my development?*
- Communication: *How could I demonstrate what I know?*
- Cooperation: *How does this experience enable us to learn from each other?*
- Application: *How can this be applied now or later?*
- Enriching community: *How does this enrich our school community?*
- Future direction: *What will this be like in the future?*

Schoolwide professional learning, as we have observed it in schools that have managed processes of reform with substantial success, has invariably involved principals and teachers in joint professional development activities. In the instance of Bordertown, the actions of a teacher leader in conjunction with a collegial teacher group and a highly strategic deputy principal enabled new forms of professional learning to be fostered. Through this collaborative learning process, the vision of the school and teachers' classroom practices were able to be brought into alignment. A dynamic new school image was one perceived outcome. Students were also the beneficiaries of such efforts, as evidenced in documented increased retention rates and improved literacy outcomes.

Brief quotes from phase four evaluation workshop participants illustrate how one particular schoolwide professional development strategy – “professional conversation” – was perceived to have facilitated enhanced school success:

Professional conversation at Stringy Bark Primary School ... has facilitated and encouraged the growth of a common language about pedagogy. Because of this process, we are now working in a collaborative way to present the best learning opportunities for children. Through professional conversations, teachers are able to make explicit their personal (and now shared) practices.

Professional knowledge has been created personally and, more importantly, has been explored and discussed in a social context with other professionals.

In schools such as these, where parallelism was clearly in place, The customary separation of principal development and teacher development had been largely rejected. It had been replaced by joint inquiry into ways to enrich the school's vision and pedagogy and to enhance the alignment between these key school elements.

Concerning the second of the three intersecting processes, creation of a schoolwide approach to pedagogy, our studies support the findings of highly authoritative recent research. In the University of Wisconsin's CORS Project, for example, a fundamental component of successful school revitalisation was reported as collective responsibility for an agreed approach to teaching, learning and assessment

(Newmann and Wehlage, 1995). In this regard, we endorse Senge's (quoted in O'Neil, 1995, p. 21) provocative assertion that:

You cannot implement "learner-directed learning", for example, in one classroom and not others. It would drive the kids nuts, not to mention the stress on the individual teacher.

But how can the numerous individual pedagogical preferences and strengths of teachers be brought together into a schoolwide approach? In our view, it is when parallelism is in place in the leadership of the school – that is, when teacher leaders assume responsibility for identifying critical commonalities in their most successful individual teaching practices and then, in conjunction with their principals, generate alignment of their agreed pedagogical principles with the school's vision (or negotiate meaningful changes in the pedagogical principles and/or vision statement).

In the case of Bordertown, successful classroom practices of individual teachers were explored in relation to the school vision and distilled over a period of months into the schoolwide pedagogical principles that are referred to in the thumbnail sketch in Appendix 2. The eight pedagogical concepts and questions focused Bordertown teachers' work on building a sustainable future for the school within its community. Thus, what evolved was a shared vision of a school community for the twenty-first century. The ground was laid for the transformation of the school's public image, enhancement of teachers' sense of professionalism and, very importantly, improvements in student outcomes.

Thus, the Bordertown parallel leaders involved their professional and civic communities in the creation of what might be called "new knowledge" – a rejuvenated school-community identity and awareness of how educational processes are fundamental to such transformation. In so doing, they inspired public and professional confidence and laid the foundations for heightened aspirations and enhanced levels of student achievement. As one teacher explained to us after a community meeting:

Only a school could develop a model like this (the pedagogical framework). For all sorts of reasons, churches can't do it, clubs can't do it, commercial agencies can't do it and town councils can't do it. Teachers working like this can shape people's thoughts and values into concepts. When they do that they give the whole town new understandings about itself, something to identify with.

A third process that is essential to successful school revitalization, one that can be activated and nurtured through parallel leadership, is organizational culture building. Of relevance here is Sergiovanni's (2000, p. viii) claim that:

Schools with character have unique cultures. They know who they are and have developed a common understanding of their purposes. They celebrate their uniqueness as a powerful way to achieve their goals.

At Bordertown, the vision and pedagogy statements manifested teacher leaders' espoused commitments to values of tolerance, understanding, self-reflection and entrepreneurial initiative. The teachers who led the school's pedagogical revitalisation told us that the professional community's perceptions of important needs of the Bordertown community provided the motivation for assertion of these values. This is reminiscent of Senge *et al.*'s (2000) claim that if organizational learning is to become organizational knowledge then "the group" must find its own ways of bridging the gap – for example, by developing understanding of the perspectives of different groups associated with the school; building new lines of communication; respecting people's inhibitions about personal change; and allowing a flexible and tolerant culture to evolve. Sample quotes from teacher leaders in our phase four schools illustrate the importance of parallel leadership to this critical point:

We are ... developing and sustaining a culture, which promotes a higher level of quality learning outcomes. This process is based on parallel leadership – using teachers and students as pivotal change agents in building a learning community based on local needs. Celebration of success at each opportunity has become an integral part of the culture. High expectations are set for the whole community and appropriate behaviours modelled and acknowledged. Our graduates at Tall Trees Secondary College leave with a sense of pride, a love of learning and a confidence to pursue their individual goals by a different way.

In summary, our research indicates that the role of parallel leadership in the development and integration of processes of professional learning, schoolwide pedagogy and culture building is fundamental to school success. Stated most simply, parallel leadership enables teacher leaders and principals to engage in mutualistic working relationships while asserting their individual values, thereby enriching the school's philosophical purpose and pedagogical practices. The result is enhancement of the school's distinctive identity, thereby sharpening the focus of professional practice and creating the foundations for capacity building. In this way, the foundations are laid for heightened whole-school achievement.

Concluding Comment

We have drawn upon recent developments in educational leadership, as well as our research-based observations of successful school reform, to develop a new educational concept, parallelism, that

places equivalent value on teacher leadership and principal leadership. We have also generated a research-based model that explicates the way that parallel leadership appears to facilitate successful school reform through three interacting processes – schoolwide professional learning, schoolwide pedagogy and schoolwide culture building.

The foundational Wisconsin studies of the past half decade (Newmann and Wehlage, 1995; King and Newmann, 2000) have made clear that schools can shape the nature of their outcomes to a degree that had probably not been previously regarded as possible. Our research serves to substantiate the Wisconsin research outcomes and to illuminate the role of school-based leadership in school improvement. In identifying the concept of parallelism, and in uncovering its relationship with definitive schoolwide reform processes, we believe we may have helped prise open the lid of the “black box” that Hallinger and Heck (1996) have viewed as a major impediment to successful innovation.

Perhaps most importantly, the power of teaching to shape meaning systems and create new forms of knowledge has become very apparent. There is every reason to have confidence that a new era may be dawning for the teaching profession.

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