

Co-constructing transformational leadership in new settings
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Developing transformational leadership is at the heart of a South Australian educational re-design initiative called Learning to Learn. This style of leadership is focused on 'developing the organisation's capacity to innovate' and is 'viewed as distributive in that it focuses on developing a shared vision and commitment to school change' (Hallinger, 2003, pp. 330-331). Learning to Learn has been funded since 1999 by the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services. Schools in Learning to Learn receive funding to send leaders and groups of teachers to a Core Learning Program which draws on the expertise of educational theorists from Australia and overseas. These experiences provide the stimulus for site wide programs aimed at systemic leadership of change to positively transform the learning environment, opportunities and outcomes for teachers and students.

In 2002 thirteen primary leaders (including principals, deputy principals and assistant principals) who had been leaders in Learning to Learn funded schools were appointed to different schools. They formed a group, which they named the 'Stewards Group', to share their experiences of, and learning about, developing leadership roles in new settings. This paper is based on research to capture the group's insights that was conducted in 2004 and 2005 as part of our ongoing consultancy work for the project. Data were collected through interviews and focus group meetings with seven of the leaders.

In this paper we summarise key findings about the paradoxical nature of transitional leadership and the constructive solutions leaders developed to co-construct transformational leadership in their new settings

The Paradoxes of Being a Leader 'in Transition'

The research revealed a number of paradoxes that confronted leaders as they took up leadership roles in new settings (Peters & Le Cornu, 2004). These paradoxes arose from the contradictions which they experienced as they tried to reconcile the multiple expectations of their roles. Analysis of the data revealed five main areas of paradox in these expectations, each of which is briefly summarised below.

Leader of learning and site manager

To varying extents, each of the leaders found that when they moved into their current schools their prioritising of 'leading learning' as the most important part of their roles was at odds with the expectations of at least some members of their new school communities. They found that some teachers and parents placed most importance on the leader as an autonomous manager of personnel and resources.

Acknowledging the past and initiating new directions

All of the leaders had left schools in which they had worked with their school communities for several years to review and redesign their sites and programs with the intention of achieving better learning outcomes for teachers and students. In moving to new schools they faced the challenge of reconciling their interests in continuous improvement with the need to learn about and acknowledge the past experiences and cultures of their new school communities. They found that time was needed for all parties to identify, acknowledge and reconcile their contradictory needs and interests before the focus could shift to moving forward together.

Building relationships and challenging professional identity

All of the leaders agreed that the most important focus during their first year in the school was building a climate of trust and respect amongst staff members and between themselves and their staffs. While realising the importance of building open and honest relationships, which often involved providing practical and emotional support at a personal level, the leaders were also keen to engage at an intellectual level with the teachers on their staff. In their previous schools they had been expected to play the role of critical friend in their staff's learning journeys by asking challenging questions, testing assumptions, analysing evidence and providing opportunities for critical reflection and dialogue. In their new contexts, they were looking for opportunities to work in similar ways but found that many teachers were not comfortable with such processes and in some cases, saw it as a threat to their professional identities.

Routine ('surface') decision-making and reflective ('deep') decision-making

Some of the new leaders found that during their first months in their schools they were expected to adopt particular routines that were already established without questioning the underlying assumptions and values. This was contradictory to the kinds of decision-making they valued, which incorporated unpacking the assumptions, principles and interests informing particular decisions.

Emotional and analytical responding

For all leaders transition was an intensely emotional experience, but at the same time they realised that they needed to respond to challenges analytically and '*put on a brave face*' (L 3) if they were to win the confidence of the school community. This meant that although they could acknowledge the validity of their emotional responses, they each sought to reframe their perceptions of difficult and upsetting experiences as learning opportunities.

In summary, the study identified a framework of paradoxes that enabled the leaders to view the challenging and emotional nature of their transition experiences through a new lens.

Co-constructing Transformational Leadership in New Settings

McNaughton and Williams (1998) use the term 'co-construction' to describe the process of people 'forming meaning and building knowledge about the world with each other' (p.

18). The research identified a number of strategies that the leaders used to manage the paradoxes described above and 'co-construct' transformational leadership in ways that met the diverse needs and expectations of their school communities (Peters & Le Cornu, 2006). What follows is a summary of these strategies.

Developing mutual trust and respect

In retrospect, all of the leaders realised that their highest priority when they started at their schools should have been the building of trusting and respectful relationships with and between the members of their school communities. In some cases leaders quickly identified this priority and acted on it. One leader identified '*sincerity*' as the key to developing trust (L 1). Another leader realised retrospectively that she had made the mistake of prioritising policy development at the expense of building relationships (L 7). Several of the leaders came to appreciate the important role that people's preconceived perceptions or negative past experiences played in their initial capacity to develop trust and respect. Understanding this enabled them to respond '*patiently and respectfully*' (L 3). They also focused on developing a culture and structures, such as peer mentoring and small group networks, that valued and encouraged the professional relationships between teachers. Most reported that it took up to two years for a trusting climate to develop.

Learning the existing culture

These leaders moved from sites in which it had taken several years to develop shared values, visions and ways of doing things. Similarly, their new sites had cultures which had evolved under the previous leadership. Although they were eager to begin a process of further cultural development with their new school communities, they found that they needed first to develop understanding of, and demonstrate respect for, the existing culture. Some found this to be a considerable challenge because many cultural aspects, such as expectations, values and norms, were not immediately obvious to them. This challenge was compounded for two participants who were new to both the school and the roles they assumed. As one said: '*... for me the big trap was... I was learning school culture at the same time as I was learning leadership culture*' (L 2). One leader addressed this issue by setting aside time on pupil free days '*for teachers to tell stories about their experiences in our school and in our community so there was still a collective history.*' (L 3) A common strategy amongst these leaders was to spend the first few months in their new schools finding out about both the positive and negative experiences of past years that had shaped the context they were entering and the possible starting points for new directions.

Negotiating shared values and vision

Where sites did not have shared values and goals for the school community, leaders prioritized their development as a basis of any further co-construction. As one said: '*What are our values? What are our expectations? So it's the ongoing search for being able to identify them. Developing language to describe them... and co-constructing along the way*' (L 6). Naturally, the process of developing school wide values was not unproblematic. Most leaders experienced tensions when they found their values were in conflict with those of one or more staff members or parents. Sometimes this conflict emerged around taken for granted practices. A useful strategy used by two of the leaders

to challenge teachers' thinking on a particular issue was that of collecting and presenting data. One found that data she collected about students' achievement provided the stimulus for staff *'to ask different and more critical questions'* (L 2). The process of developing shared values and vision meant that eventually leaders and staff were able to negotiate what one leader referred to as a shared *'educational bottom line'* (L 3). She described this as a mechanism for accountability in all areas of endeavour which consisted of a written statement which made very explicit everything that was expected of teachers.

Knowing when to compromise

Inevitably there were times when conflict occurred between the leaders and members of their school communities around values and ways of doing things. A dilemma for all leaders in such situations was the extent to which they should compromise their own values and beliefs in co-constructing culture in their schools. However, they were aware that there were times when deciding to compromise was the most effective way of moving forwards. For instance, an Assistant Principal who initially found some parents opposed her attempts to make teaching more student-centred compromised in ways that enabled her and the parents to find satisfaction in her classroom practices (L 4). In contrast, a leader who was concerned about a teacher who yelled at students decided not to compromise. She took the advice of a colleague who suggested she should *'require her to stop it'*. Much to her amazement, the teacher later shared with colleagues that it was a powerful learning moment for her (L 3).

Developing explicit communication structures

All leaders found that a key part of co-constructing leadership was developing explicit structures to enable effective communication with members of their school communities. These structures included developing a shared language for talking about issues (L 7) and providing opportunities for one to one professional dialogue (L 5). Written communication was a further tool valued by the leaders. In particular they felt that email correspondence had a number of advantages in that it provided *'the time to think and the time to compose'*, while also producing *'a permanent record and a journal of what's been happening'* (L 4). Written communication in the form of documentation of policies was a further important communication structure because it *'established all that stuff that distracts you from the big business and it's in place and it seems like no one questions it because even the kids will remind us if we get it wrong'* (L 3).

Reflecting to Reframe

Reflection, or the attempt to critically analyse and make new meanings, was a critical process in leaders' management of the stressful emotions experienced early in transition and their attempts to involve staff in co-construction of transformational leadership. Most experienced transition as a 'journey' which had both highs and lows: *'And I think that being part of the journey has been really important and you do have to put yourself back to being...a beginner, to be a leader'* (L 4) Through viewing transition in this way were able to 're-frame' the lows as learning experiences: *The process is what you focus on and I tend now to more and more say, 'What is the issue and then, how are we going to go about investigating it?'* (L 3). An exciting development for most leaders was that, as they

moved into their fourth year in the schools, they found that teachers who were initially reluctant to be challenged had reached a level of trust where they were open to reflecting critically on their practice.

Most leaders felt that their involvement in Learning to Learn, and the resultant learning, had developed their abilities to see meaningful patterns across their diverse experiences of leadership. They felt that it was the opportunities they had had to develop new models of thinking about leadership that supported them to attempt co-construction in their new settings.

Accessing support

All the leaders agreed that the process of reframing that enabled them to survive the difficult first year of transition could not have occurred to the same extent without the support they were able to access. Support came from a variety of sources such as a co-principal, the Chairperson of the School Council, a partner, or from being able to tap into other networks of colleagues to support professional learning about particular issues. For one principal, keeping a reflective journal over the year provided a source of evaluation and solace. Several of the leaders also commented on the power of an article ('John Sherwood's Dance' by Tim Dalmau) provided by Margot Foster, the Manager of Learning to Learn, which uses the metaphor of 'dance' to explore the challenges of co-constructing leadership in a new setting. The most important source of support for most of the leaders, however, was that the formation of the Steward's Group because it provided the opportunity to debrief with trusted others who shared similar constructions of the leadership role and who were facing similar challenges in trying to develop leadership in new settings. The final supportive aspect for all of the leaders was that of the passing of time. They all found that, over time, they and their school communities were able to negotiate more compatible interpretations of leadership and learning cultures that enabled needed changes to occur.

Conclusion

The findings about school leaders' experiences of transition reveal that, for them, constructing leadership roles in new sites involved managing paradoxes. These paradoxes arose from contradictions between the perceptions and expectations of the incoming leaders about what their roles should be, and those of some members of their new school communities. The study confirms the tenuous and negotiated nature of educational leadership. As Dalmau (1994) suggests, *'the process of empowering leaders begins in the group – it is not something which automatically happens by virtue of their appointment'* (p. 11). The leaders in this study found that regardless of how they had interpreted their roles in their former settings, they needed to begin that process anew in conjunction with their new communities so that their leadership was responsive to their different needs, expectations and contextual conditions. These leaders used a number of strategies that, over a considerable period of time, contributed to the co-construction of leadership which was acceptable to the community and also in line with the transformational model they favoured. Hopefully, their experiences and insights can support others who face similar opportunities and challenges as they attempt to co-construct leadership in new settings.

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