

Leaders in Transition: Living with Paradoxes

Dr Judy Peters, School of Education, University of South Australia
Dr Rosie Le Cornu, School of Education, University of South Australia

(with grateful acknowledgment of the contribution of the participating leaders)

Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of school leaders who moved from one school to another, part way through their involvement in the Learning to Learn Project. The transition from schools in which they were acknowledged leaders of learning, to schools where they had to forge this role anew, proved so challenging that some leaders formed a network and met regularly. During 2004 a study was conducted to capture the insights of these leaders about transition and strategies for managing it positively. This paper presents the findings of the study which revealed that for these leaders the challenges of transition were related to paradoxes created by the disjunction between their experiences of leadership in *Learning to Learn* schools and the expectations of leadership held by some members of the school community in their new schools. Living with these paradoxes over the first year in the new school was emotional and difficult work that required each leader, and the group as a whole, to employ a range of strategies to maintain positive engagement. These strategies, together with the five identified paradoxes, are discussed in this paper.

Background

Since 1999, the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services has provided funding for selected schools to participate in a program of education renewal through involvement in the Learning to Learn Project. Schools in the Project receive funding to send school 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. Principals and designated change leaders in each site, project managers, Departmental Curriculum officers and university colleagues attached to the project meet together regularly in Learning Circles, each encompassing between 6-8 of the sites involved in the project. The purpose of the Learning Circles is to provide the opportunity for participants to reflect on and share their insights, tensions, concerns, dilemmas and questions as leaders of learning in their schools. The researchers have been involved as university colleagues to three of the Learning Circles in the project since its inception.

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. The Learning to Learn Project Manager, Margot Foster, on behalf of these leaders, approached the researchers to conduct a small study to investigate and document the experiences and insights of this group of leaders as they translated their learning about change and educational leadership into new settings. The study was conducted as part of the researchers' ongoing consultancy work for the project.

Fullan (1996) made the observation that while leadership in educational change has generated enormous interest over the years, "it is a tribute to the complexities and dilemmas inherent in this topic to realise that much of the message remains elusive" (p. 112). What we know from the school reform literature of the 80s and 90s is that school leadership is high on the list of conditions that promote change in schools. In a study on restructuring and organisational culture in schools, Peters, Dobbins and Johnson (1996) found that school leaders, particularly principals, were important, firstly in conceptualising a vision for change and secondly, having the knowledge, skills and understandings to put that vision, pertaining to the school ethos or culture, into practice. The way principals interpret their leadership role has been found to be critical in transforming school culture from "bureaucratic organisation" to "communal organisation" (Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley, & Beresford, 2000; Lee & Smith, 1994). In developing learning communities, part of the school leader's role has been seen to be providing opportunities for staff to learn to work differently and to assume new roles and responsibilities. Such terms as "transformational leadership" and "constructivist leadership" have been used to capture the move from the single leader position to some sense of shared leadership (Lambert, 2000).

This paper reports on the learning journey of leaders who had spent a number of years developing their understanding and practices as leaders of learning and educational transformation when they had to develop their leadership roles in new settings.

Methodology

This study was qualitative in nature. According to Berg (2001), 'quality refers to the what, how, when, and where of a thing – its essence and ambience' (p. 3). Our aim was to achieve a rich and detailed representation of the 'what, how, when and where' of the transition experiences and learning of Learning to Learn leaders as they moved into new appointments. Creswell (1994) defined a qualitative study as one 'which is an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting' (p. 2). The study was delimited to capturing the perceptions of the leaders – unfortunately time did not allow for a more intensive study which would have provided some insights into the staff's and community members' views also.

The research took the form of a small empirical study. The data collection procedures used were:

- observation and audio taping of the final two meetings of the leaders' transition support group ("Stewards' Group");
- an individual taped interview with six leaders (approximately forty minutes in length (See questions in appendix); and
- a written account by each participant of a critical incident in their learning journey about the transition process.

Merriam (1998) identified a collaborative or participatory approach to research as one way of enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of naturalistic research data (p. 205). A collaborative approach to the research occurred through researchers and participants working together as much as possible, both in analysis and interpretations. Transcripts were returned to the participants for annotation and further elaboration. A meeting was convened to allow researchers and participants to scrutinise the data and to compare and contrast emerging interpretations. It was decided to use a framework of paradoxes to capture the contradictory expectations that the leaders experienced during transition.

The following section presents the key paradoxes that have emerged from the interview and meeting transcripts in regard to how the leader's role is constructed and enacted. The final section of the paper discusses the findings in relation to recent leadership literature.

The Paradoxes of Being a Leader 'in Transition'

The paradoxes of being leaders in transition arose from the contradictions the leaders found between their perceptions and expectations about what their roles should be, and those of some members of their new school communities. The analysis of the data revealed five themes which we have represented as juxtapositions of role expectations in an attempt to capture the pressures on the leaders as they tried to meet what, at times, seemed to be competing expectations. These are:

- leading learning *and* managing the site;
- acknowledging the past *and* initiating new directions;
- building relationships *and* challenging professional identity;
- routine ('surface') decision-making *and* reflective ('deep') decision-making; and
- responding emotionally *and* analytically.

1) Leading learning and managing the site

One of the major findings of the study was that there were contradictions between the leaders' expectation that their primary role would be to "lead learning", while many staff and members of their communities expected them, first and foremost, to manage personnel and resources.

Each of the leaders in this study had been on a personal journey over many years in which they had constructed multi-faceted conceptions of the leadership role and how it

might be enacted in practice. Immediately prior to their current placements they had leadership roles in schools that participated in the Learning to Learn Project. This meant that for several years they and their staffs had received funding and professional development to help them to develop school cultures that maximised learning opportunities for students and teachers (including school leaders). In describing the ways their leadership had evolved over recent years, the principals revealed common issues around the notion of leadership for learning. They sometimes referred to this as “invitational leadership”, with a focus on learning. One principal described herself as “leading learning” through:

... a facilitative process of engaging staff in thinking and articulating their conceptions about what effective learning was and thinking/re framing their role as a teacher and as a learner. Setting up a culture where teachers were able to talk through issues of teaching and learning; and where teachers wanted to engage in discussions about learning and teaching. (A)

Central to this facilitative process was the development of a “shared vision about the new cutting edge education” (N) through consideration of “what we were doing, why we doing it and the learning outcomes” (S).

These leaders considered an important aspect of their invitational leadership to be that of developing “density of leadership” (N) amongst the staff so that they took responsibility for sustaining their own and each other’s learning, as well as for that of students:

It was a very open dialogue all the time....getting them to come up with their own learning and their own goals and so on. Through the project it absolutely turned the whole culture of the school but it was something that needed time. (S)

It actually reached the stage where they went from a group of people that were questioning of their own abilities and skills and knowledge to a group of people who were offering and actually being sought to provide some sort of professional development to other teachers and invited into other schools. (C)

The leaders’ descriptions of the multiple facets of the roles they played as leaders of learning included: analysing; questioning; processing; co-producing; collaborating; directing; facilitating; articulating team thoughts into central directions; building relationship with all members of the school community and providing professional development, resources and feedback. In addition to these all principals saw that one of their most important roles was to be a learner themselves. One commented that this was one aspect of her role that had changed after her transition from her previous school:

I think in reflection about having opportunities to read and go to lots of training development, to now I don’t think I’ve been to one T & D session outside the holidays in two years....So that’s what I think I’ve missed the most. (L)

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 principal as an autonomous manager of personnel and resources. One leader reported on how she thought some parents initially viewed the principal’s role:

They saw a leader as being a person who told the staff what they needed to know, when they needed to learn it, how they needed to learn it. (L)

Another felt that to the staff “the principal was mother and professor and rescuer of all things and made all the decisions and then there were worker bees (J). She found after she had been at the school for some time, that her attempts to develop a more collaborative style of leadership were seen as shirking her responsibilities:

And one day one of them said, for goodness I’m sick to death of hearing about broad based leadership. All it is an excuse for you not to have to do anything. And I said, that’s not what it means at all. It means I actually respect and value all of your experience and I want you to join me in moving this school forward rather than telling you what to do. I’m much more of a team based player. (J)

As a result of the contradictions that existed between their own and others’ expectations of their role, most found themselves living with a paradox which one described as being expected to operate in a “delivery” mode while personally believing that leadership is about “co-creation” (N).

2) Acknowledging the past and initiating new directions

The Learning to Learn Project has the primary objective of transforming learning environments. 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. However, for some, even trying to find out about the past was difficult:

Staff expected that I would know what was in their heads - that is my impression – they wanted me to appreciate the school culture – however I didn’t feel that I got information about what that was – until I had put my foot in it. (A)

She described the difficulty as “learning about school-culture while being expected to know and live school culture” (A).

In most cases the leaders found that they needed to put their own interests and ideas about new directions “on hold” because they were contradictory to the needs and interests of school community members. In the first few months in their new schools they found 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. For instance, one principal found that because of negative past experiences, her staff placed top priority on developing a culture of trust and respect within the school community. Although she had a strong interest in curriculum development, and could see a need for that to occur in the school, she realised that it would be pointless to try to impose her ideas when her teachers so clearly prioritised something else:

That's been difficult for me because it's about trying to monitor the time and not rush things because in rushing things it would be totally ineffective and an absolute waste of time. People just weren't ready to talk curriculum and professional development. (C)

Another who moved quickly into policy development in her new school, realised in retrospect that she had made a mistake in not correctly identifying what should have been a higher priority:

Yeah, I guess it's still that balance stuff. There was no documentation, there was no paperwork or anything and I just panicked and went straight into that, when perhaps what I should have done is thought, it's been like this for X amount of years, I need to establish relationships first with all the kids and all the staff and then come to that. (S)

Although these leaders recognised the importance of acknowledging and building on past experiences, some were surprised to find that some staff and/or parents expected that acknowledgment to take the form of replication. Two of the leaders specifically gave examples where they had received notes from staff saying "this is what it used to be like, so why aren't we doing it like this now" (S) or where actual comments had been made such as "that's not how we do things here" (J).

For at least two of the leaders an expectation based on past experiences that was impossible for them to meet was that they should be males;

The first one (expectation) was that I would be a male, definitely. An older, experienced male. And I to this day am still battling with that from the staff and from parents as well.

In retrospect, all principals recognised that in moving to their new schools they needed to allow much more time to pass than they had anticipated, before they could expect members of the school community to be prepared to move in new directions. 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. It was only once they had been in their schools for considerable periods of time that they could begin to see such forward movement. As one leader said; "I think now we are at innovation ... but that's two years down the track (J).

3) 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. In particular, as newcomers to their schools they needed to show staff, parents and students that they were trustworthy and had their interests at heart:

For them the huge issue was trust and faith in the principals, the leaders. And so their first interest when we did a ‘what are the sacred cows of (school) and what are the things that need changing?’ the thing that needed changing was the notion of developing trust and honesty and openness and basically in the leadership. (C)

This leader found that she was able to make significant headway in building strong relationships with her staff by keeping an open mind and providing practical and emotional support at a personal level. She felt that the key to her success had been “sincerity”:

I also knew that they were ... pretty astute. I had to do something sincerely. It was about who was I really, because they would see through me if it was just about any false impressions. (C)

While realising the importance of building trust and open, honest relationships, 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 identity:

So the difficulty for me was, how do I convince them that I think that they are good teachers that could be even better teachers and have them believe the challenges about moving them on and not pulling them to pieces. (C)

Several of the leaders also encountered an unexpected problem. They found that through the intensive focus on discussions about learning in their previous schools, they had developed ways of talking about issues which was almost a different “language”, and one to which their new staffs had difficulty relating – and again, which threatened some teachers’ professional identity:

In fact it was very interesting because I’d leapt in and just (used) the dialogue, the learning, the phrases, the terminology, the jargon, the methodologies, the theory behind the practice. I just assumed that (they) would have had it because it had become so normal at (previous school) and I didn’t realise that I was raising a red flag to these people because I was offending them through the very things I was

trying to motivate them with. And I kept using language, not realising that they were getting madder and madder about it. (J)

Having come from a school that was so learning focused, not just the children but the teachers as learners, to a culture where the language was totally different. I sort of felt quite isolated because I was almost talking a language that they didn't understand ...(S)

The focus on 'open dialogue' for professional engagement clearly presented a number of challenges for both the leaders and the teachers.

Most of the leaders found that they were able to win the trust of parents more readily than that of their staffs.

What was interesting was that I actually won the trust of the parents ... much more quickly than the trust of the staff. Getting school council on side and the rest of the parents happened far more easily ... just the fact that we were prepared to meet with parents, that we would take phone calls, that we responded to concerns, that we were doing things around the school. (C)

For one of the leaders, the strong relationships she developed with parents actually created some tensions in the relationships she had with staff:

There was a lot of support in the wider community...Interestingly this was also a challenge in my relationship with staff – there was kind of the perception – you like them more than us.....which I found surprising cause I didn't see it that way. (A)

Her difficulties establishing relationships with the teachers were also due to the fact that some were initially suspicious about her motives in taking the placement, believing that she was there to promote District interests over their own. She found that she needed to make a deliberate effort to focus on the positive:

I enjoyed being part of a bigger team and even though there was a lot of tension, there were also some great pockets of support. This taught me to look for and attend to positive situations, relationships etc as levers for change. It would have been really easy to meet suspicion with suspicion – which I think I did for a while and this was very unproductive. (A)

Another leader came to understand that some of the negativity that seemed to emanate from some staff towards her wasn't personal, but rather the product of emotional responses to events before she arrived:

...when you go into a new site you're opening up a whole lot of emotions that might have been trapped within the site before you've arrived and now they're coming out and emerging and you're dealing with a whole lot of contextual issues

that you simply do have to patiently and respectfully deal with because they're going to be there. (J)

There is no doubt that each of the leaders appreciated the importance of building positive relationships with their staffs and wider school community. However they found themselves living with a paradox of building professional relationships with their staffs. For these leaders this meant getting to know and supporting teachers whilst at the same time, challenging them to shift their thinking about their role and the nature of teaching and learning – in effect, asking them to be willing to open themselves up to scrutiny, to have their professional identity challenged. Margot Foster, the Learning to Learn manager explained the process:

When teachers start investigating their work and researching what they do and seeing new things, you actually give them a new pair of eyes, you reframe their professional identity.

4) Routine (“surface”) decision making and reflective (“deep”) decision making

Another finding from the study was the pressure experienced by some of the leaders as a result of the different approaches to decision-making favoured by themselves and their staff. 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. The difference could be explained as the difference between routine or ‘surface’ decision-making approach and reflective or ‘deep’ decision-making. One leader described the dilemma this way:

Like staff were pushing for a quick decision on something without the dialogue and principles that underpin it.... It could be a really simple bit like, when ... the relief teacher comes to our school they are not allowed to use the computer room. (N)

Towards the end of the first term, one principal realised that she had a different “mindset” when making decisions, to that of some of her staff:

And that was about towards the end of term one that I realised I was using another language and coming from another place. If I was to strip it bare, I had a mindset that said, students are our core business and everything we do is about improving student learning. And if we had an issue with a child the question is how do we change the...the thinking, the belief systems we have in order to move that child forward, engage that child. (J)

Another felt that the teachers were inviting her to “sustain the contradictions” that existed in their established practices:

...the articulation for and of change was high but the surprise for me was that I was perhaps only to dabble around the edges... that we were not going anywhere near our core values or any of the underpinning structures that were in place. (N)

A third faced a similar kind of contradiction between the school's stated core values and established practice when negotiating with the parent club:

(The parent club) always sell(s) 40 kilograms of potato chips on sports day because that's the fundraiser for the year. And I said, one of our core values is health and well being. And we look at the mind, body, spirit as a united thing and ... attitudes about children coming out and enjoying health I think we need to be serving healthy sandwiches and fruit and salad rolls and fresh fruit salad and watermelon scoops, not hot fried chips. (J)

The leaders adopted a number of strategies to deal with the dilemmas created by the different decision-making models in place. One strategy which was a focus for most leaders in their first year was working with staff, students and community members to clarify and further develop the vision and values that would be able to inform decisions in the future.

I worked very hard in the first year on the airy fairy stuff as they called it...value statements and we worked really hard, we did a lot of questioning children. Every child had input. Then there were parents, governing council and gradually we honed down to six core values which were cause for great debate but again once we got beyond the debate and beyond the conflict we got to the ownership, which was really good. And then a vision and mission statement. (J)

However, in the interim period, before agreement about core values and principles had been reached, at least one of the principals found that the only way forward in a disagreement about a funding issue was through compromise:

So it became a test case for many bits and fortunately it is something that you can reach a compromise, which we have. So I feel like I've compromised some of the funds because there are ways we go about the catering now that don't fully satisfy me and don't fully satisfy them, well some people there. Some people agree with me and some people don't. But it's one we can still have business around. (N)

Another learnt that acknowledging the importance of and attending to some of the routine matters was a way to build trust with her colleagues:

I reckon I have learned to be more patient and to celebrate small movements towards shifts in culture at school. Also the importance of doing some of the 'small things' eg rosters, routines etc really thoroughly to ensure that people trust you enough to broach the bigger picture things like learning and curriculum is important. (A)

Through these strategies of developing a shared vision, compromising, and attending to seemingly small issues, the leaders were able to live with the inherent tensions associated with 'surface' and 'deep' decision-making.

5) Responding emotionally and analytically

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” (J) 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 emotionally charged perceptions through processes of intellectual analysis. As one put it:

Even with all the things you think that you have learned about learning being an uncertain process – the paradigm of a leader who knows where they are going and how to get there is very strong. (A)

The emotions experienced by the leaders ran the gamut from heartening to disheartening. All were excited about assuming leadership roles in new settings and welcomed the opportunity for new challenges and new learning. Most, such as this leader, knew that they would be undertaking a “journey” that would have its highs and lows:

That it's not as easy as what it seemed but I still love it. And I think that being part of the journey has been really important and you do have to put yourself back to being part of a beginner, to be a leader. And my philosophy has remained the same really despite the hiccups along the way. So I think that brings a much deeper learning and understanding of who you are and what education could be. And the more we know the less we know. (L)

Emotional responses that were more difficult to manage arose from the feelings of isolation that enveloped some leaders as they began the long process of establishing trust and relationships with an unknown group of people:

The isolation – I felt at times very out of it as a leader – felt there were many things I wasn't being let in on and I wasn't used to this. (A)

In some cases the isolation was partly self-imposed by the enormity of the tasks they felt they faced in the early stages and the extended hours they felt they needed to spend on them:

So in a sense I felt very isolated. The amount of hours. See I guess the other problem is I'm a perfectionist and things have to be 110%. I won't settle for second best and that's been my worst enemy a lot of the times. (S)

As leaders became aware that there were some significant contradictions between their own perceptions of effective leadership, and those of some members of the school community, most began to have some significant feelings of self-doubt and anxiety about their performance in the new role as exemplified in the following:

I had lots of discomfort and feeling at some weak moments and uncertain moments, questions about my style. Maybe it is inappropriate to keep always going for the principles and underlying values and all of that. (N)

My hope cycle turns into a despair cycle very quickly. (S)

The cumulative effect of such disheartening emotions spilled into to some leaders' lives outside of school at times affecting family, lifestyle, health and feelings of well being. Although the emotions engendered by living with paradoxes were overwhelming at times, they each used processes of intellectual analysis to manage their feelings of discouragement and look for ways forward:

And always, how else can I do this? There was a sense of frustration too. So I would go from that to, I've got to turn this around. This is a challenge for me. So then I would sit down and think, how can I turn this around? What can I do? (C)

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? I think using that notion of enquiry rather than saying, I've got the solution and we're all going to put it into place. (J)

Through these processes of intellectual analysis, leaders were able to "reframe" their perceptions of difficult and upsetting experiences as learning opportunities. This enabled them to continue to move forwards, albeit slowly, in negotiating the kinds of leadership roles and learning cultures they valued.

Living with 'the paradoxes': the role of support mechanisms

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. One leader felt that she was fortunate to have support from her co-principal:

I'm fortunate in that the person I'm working with we get on really well. So I guess we've had one another to bounce ideas off of and to laugh and having a sense of humour really helps. Being able to laugh about what happens at the end of the day, just debrief with one another, that's helped. (C)

Another found that a change in the Chairperson of the School Council provided a source of support, while a third cited:

Support from community, from the supportive staff at school and from personal and professional networks. The district team were also really helpful with the concrete challenges and in providing moral support. (A)

Others mentioned support from 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, culminating in a one page overview representing the learning journey in her school, provided source of evaluation and solace:

It was cathartic. It was like putting the hundreds of pages of journal notes and all the readings and all the dialogues from the Learning to Learn leaders in transition work... into a simple one page for me to say, okay has there been a difference? (J)

Several of the leaders also commented on the power of an article (“John Sherwood’s Dance” by Tim Dalmau) given to them by Margot Foster, the Learning to Learn Manager, which used the metaphor of “dance” to explore the challenges of co-constructing leadership in a new setting.

... it is so true and now I think I’m doing a Tango or I’m doing a waltz or a slow step. About people’s perceptions about who you are, how their own personal learning journey impacts on that and then how you fit with the total dance. (L)

The most important source of support for most of the leaders, however, was that generated through the formation of the Steward’s Group. This group was formed when the Learning to Learn project manager, Margot Foster, realised that there were a number of principals who had moved from Learning to Learn Schools who needed the opportunity to have some space to ‘make sense of their experiences’ and to share their experiences and learning about transition. Leaders gave number of reasons given as to why the regular meetings of the Steward’s group were so helpful. Chief amongst these was the opportunity to debrief with other people who shared similar constructions of the leadership role and who were facing similar challenges in trying to develop leadership in a new setting:

And when you’re feeling frustrated and thinking, why am I doing this job, who cares, just to remember there are others in the same position. So that’s been useful too. And hearing other stories...(C)

The leadership in transition group was absolutely the most positive thing that could have come about I think. Because of that sense of loss in community, the sense of not having a single person who knows of your journey, who you can have conversations with anymore about common understandings. (L)

Trust was an important component in the success of the group. All of the leaders needed the opportunity to debrief with supportive colleagues about their experiences in their new settings, but were aware that they needed to be very careful to choose trusted confidantes.

You could talk about people and what's been happening to you in a very safe environment, knowing that you have a sounding board and expertise and empathy from other people. (L)

The debriefing sessions in the Steward's Group were not just about finding comfort and support. The leaders acknowledged that their involvement in Learning to Learn had provided them with a lens and framework for processing things which helped them depersonalise situations. They found that it was through their dialogue they were able to detect common themes, enabling them to reframe their experiences in ways that helped them to learn about more about developing leadership in a new setting:

It helped because for me I could see some of the patterns. It helped me be more strategic. Definitely helped me sustain some optimism about the process. Helped give some courage to ride out of the discomforts and not to move quickly and fall back into old ways. (N)

The leaders also explored various questions in the Stewards group such as 'How do we lead the transition respectfully (being respectful to staff and previous principal)?' One recommendation was:

... to try really hard to adopt a position where you value everyone who has gone before you and know and trust that everyone has worked with a spirit of intent of wanting the best and why that might look different to us when we move in. While it might look different we have to find a very respectful and real valuing of what it was they did and what's happened before and that what we are going to do is add another layer and another bit. (N)

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. Being able to recognise that there had been progress over time encouraged leaders to persevere.

We have come such a long way in so many areas that it's almost like every time there's hindering things coming up I can deal with them better now because there are so many other good things happening that I know that are good and it makes you deal with those things a little bit better. (S)

I just think the notion of it takes three years to bring about change, it's just probably been reinforced to me. That this is in fact is true. You can't rush some things. (C).

The support that these leaders received from various sources clearly played a vital role in enabling them to survive the transition period. Without a doubt, the Steward's group proved to be an essential element in that it not only provided support at an emotional level but it enhanced the leaders' capacities to reframe their experiences in ways that helped them to learn more about developing leadership in a new setting.

Discussion

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. It is likely that such contradictions occur to some extent whenever leaders change sites. Dalmau (1994) referred to Sherwood's metaphor of a dance to describe the intricate steps that enable new leaders and their staff to gradually orient towards a shared construction of effective leadership. However, for these leaders, the paradoxes appear to have been exacerbated by their constructions of leadership as transformational and focussed on learning, challenge and continuous improvement, rather than as managerial, and focussed on acknowledging the status quo and maintaining levels of comfort and familiarity.

Although constructions of leadership differed among the participants, being the products of their diverse life experiences and world-views, they all had the common experience of holding leadership positions in Learning to Learn schools in their previous appointments. The Learning to Learn project had provided them and their staff with the funding, resources, support and professional development opportunities to grow together and develop particular kinds of cultures, structures and practices that were "learner- and learning-centred". Dimmock (2000, cited in Dimmock & Walker, 2004) describes the "learning- and learner-centred school as one whose mission, organization, curriculum and leadership are singularly focussed on providing successful learning experiences and outcomes for all students" (p. 42). Through this process they had been able, over a considerable period of time, to co-construct interpretations of leadership with their school communities which prioritised distributive leadership of learning and a focus on continuous improvement. These interpretations of leadership did not prove to be fully congruent with the expectations of leadership in their new settings.

It is hardly surprising that there were some contradictory expectations of leadership by the leaders and some members of their new school communities. Much of the literature about school leadership in recent years has focussed on the many different interpretations of the leadership role that have developed. In particular attention has been paid to the competing interpretations of transformative leadership, focussed on "developing the organisation's capacity to innovate" and "viewed as distributive in that it focuses on developing a shared vision and commitment to school change (Hallinger, 2003, pp. 330-331) and instructional or managerial leadership, characterised by "strong, directive leadership focussed on curriculum and instruction from the principal" (Hallinger, 2003, p. 329). It is clear that leadership is complex and multi-layered and needs to be interpreted

accordingly. Dimmock and Walker (2004) suggested that leaders who see themselves as transformational still need to be excellent managers of organisational structures, technology and human and financial resources in order to develop learning-centred schools (p. 43). Day, Harris and Hadfield (2001), in their study of teachers' perceptions of effective leaders found they need to be both transformative and "transactional – ensuring that systems were maintained and developed, targets were met, and that their schools ran smoothly" (p. 47). What the leaders in this study found when they moved into new contexts, was 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. Commenting on his work on the construction of leadership identity, Moos (2003) cited a similar finding:

The focus of that work had been on how school leaders, in getting to be and staying members of different communities of practice, form their identities. The identities are shaped in those interplays, not as a passive formation, but as an interaction between leader and community. (pp. 28-29)

In renegotiating their leadership with their new communities, all the leaders found that relationship building was the most critical factor. This finding has been supported by most recent studies of effective leadership (see for example Day et al., 2000; Moos, 2003) and might appear to be common sense, but most of the leaders reported that it was easy to underestimate the amount of time and effort that should be spent on building relationships in the face of the many other competing priorities faced by leaders in new settings. Those that made building trust and respect their highest priority, found that they were able to move forwards once relationships had been established. Those who initially focussed on other goals found that the suspicions and resistance of some school community members hindered progress towards these.

Another important finding from the study is the extent to which constructing leadership roles in new settings is intensely emotional work. Beatty (2000) suggested that a further paradox of leadership exists in the contradiction between the complex emotions it can invoke and the expectation that strong leaders should not show emotions. As they grappled with the many challenges in their first year, the leaders in this study experienced a wide range of exhilarating and potentially debilitating emotions, but felt enormous pressure to maintain a calm and rational front. The emotional component of school leaders' work is beginning to receive attention in the literature with acknowledgments that to be effective leaders need "to combine practical intelligence, analytical intelligence and emotional intelligence" (Davies & Davies, 2004, p. 35). Higgs and Dulewicz (2000, cited in Day et al., 2001) found that one of the core elements common to more than a hundred successful leaders was "an awareness of their own emotions; an ability to recognize and acknowledge them without being swamped; driven by a degree of self belief". Fortunately, the leaders in this study were able to share these emotions with trusted others and especially with colleagues in the Stewards' Group who were experiencing similar feelings. Through such sharing they were able to sustain their "self belief" through times of great anxiety and stress.

At the time they were living through the transition experience, the leaders were not consciously using a framework of paradoxes to reframe their thinking, but they were aware that they were subject to contradictory expectations. It was through their involvement in this research, and the collaborative identification and discussion of themes in the data, that the framework of paradoxes emerged as one way of understanding the challenging and emotional nature of their transition experiences. Paradoxes have been used by a number of theorists to explain some of the contradictions which exist in post modern times. Hargreaves (1995) identified five paradoxes of the post modern culture that have implications for educators. One of these which resonates with these leaders' transition experiences is "stronger orientation to the future creates greater nostalgia for the past" (p. 15). The leaders found that their desire to move forward was at odds with some school community members' need to have the past recognised and acknowledged. Cline and Necochea (2000) suggested that a dominant paradox for school leaders is the expectation that they become transformational reformers while having been socialised by rigid system expectations and accountability measures to maintain and continue the status quo (p. 151). Through their involvement in Learning to Learn and development of dispersed leadership in their previous schools, the leaders in this study had largely been able to shed the effects of such socialisation, but found themselves doubting their belief in and capacity for transformational leadership once they faced wide-spread expectations that they should conform to more managerial interpretations of their roles. Finally, Farson (2002) argued that "predicaments" in the form of "permanent, inescapable, complicated, paradoxical dilemmas" are intrinsic to leadership at higher levels (p. 6). He suggested that whereas problems can be solved, predicaments can only be "coped with" through "interpretative thinking" which he defines as to:

Put a larger frame around a situation, see it in the sweep of history, understand it in context. (Leaders) must be especially alert to deeper paradoxical influences and therefore the possible unintended consequences of any decisions that flow from that interpretation. (p. 6)

Through developing an understanding of the paradoxes which are intrinsic to their work, Farson argued that leaders may "free their energies for more productive efforts" (p. 7)

Farson's theory appears to be true for the leaders in this study. Their response to the difficulties they encountered while constructing leadership roles in new settings was to "put a larger frame" around their experiences through processes of debriefing and analysis. Individual leaders used a number of diverse strategies to help them analyse their experiences of transition, including reading relevant literature, using writing as a reflective tool and debriefing with colleagues, family members and line managers. However, the strategy that was of particular significance and common to all of them was their participation in the Steward's Group. It was in this group that they were able to explore and make sense of their experiences with colleagues who had some shared understanding of what it means to be a leader of learning. The power of such groups, often referred to as 'learning communities' in the teacher development literature, is that they provide an enabling context for professional growth and provide opportunities for

participants to “create as well as receive knowledge” (Lieberman, 2000). The Stewards group certainly did this, and in this way, acted as much more than a support group. Feiman-Nemser (2001) argued that what distinguishes professional learning communities from support groups where participants mainly share ideas and offer encouragement is their “critical stance and commitment to inquiry” (p. 1043).

Finally, all of the leaders realised in retrospect that there was one factor influencing their transition experiences over which they had no control – the passing of time. As one leader said, “I cannot wait until first year is over and I become history” (S). There is ample evidence in the research literature that change in schools is a very slow process, often taking five or more years (Dimmock 2000, cited in Dimmock & Walker, 2004). It is important for leaders moving into new settings to realise that considerable time will be needed to co-construct effective leadership in the face of diverse needs and expectations.

Conclusion

This paper has used a framework of paradoxes to explain the challenging and emotional nature of the transition experiences of a group of leaders who have moved from one school to another. In particular, they moved from being in schools involved in the Learning to Learn project, which focused on transforming learning environments for teachers and students, to schools which were not in the Project. The paradoxes these leaders experienced 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. They were also related to the varying perceptions of learning communities, teachers’ roles, decision-making and ways of working. The paper discussed various strategies that these leaders used to move forward in their new sites to develop the kinds of leadership roles and learning cultures they valued.

References

- Beatty, B. B. (2000). *Pursuing the paradox of emotion and educational leadership*. Paper presented at the APAPDC National Online Conference, Online.
- Berg, B. L. (2001). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (4th ed.). Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon.
- Cline, Z., & Necochea, J. (2000). Socialization paradox: a challenge for educational leaders. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 3(2), 151-158.
- Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. California: Sage.
- Dalmau, T. (1994). *John Sherwood's Dance: A map for understanding unconscious transactions between groups and newly-appointed leaders*: Dalmau & Associates.
- Davies, B. J., & Davies, B. (2004). Strategic leadership. *School Leadership & Management*, 24(1), 29.
- Day, C., Harris, A., & Hadfield, M. (2001). Challenging the orthodoxy of effective school leadership. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 4(1), 39.
- Day, C., Harris, A., Hadfield, M., Tolley, H., & Beresford, J. (2000). *Leading schools in times of change*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

- Dimmock, C., & Walker, A. (2004). A new approach to strategic leadership: learning-centredness, connectivity and cultural context in school design. *School Leadership & Management*, 24(1), 39.
- Farson, R. (2002). Decisions, Dilemmas and Dangers. *School Administrator*, 59(2), 6.
- Feiman-Nemser, S. (2001). From Preparation to Practice: Designing a Continuum to Strengthen and Sustain Teaching. *Teachers College Record*, 103(6), 1013-1056.
- Fullan, M. (1996). Leadership for change. In K. Leithwood & J. Chapman & D. Corson & P. Hallinger & A. Hart (Eds.), *International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Administration, Part 2*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Press.
- Hallinger, P. (2003). Leading Educational Change: reflections on the practice of instructional and transformational leadership. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 33(3), 329.
- Hargreaves, A. (1995). Renewal in the age of paradox. *Educational Leadership*, 52(7), 14.
- Lambert, L. (2000). *Building leadership capacity in schools*. Paper presented at the South Australian Centre for Leadership in Education, Adelaide.
- Lee, V., & Smith, B. (1994). *High school restructuring and student achievement: A new study finds strong links (7): Issues in Restructuring Schools*.
- Lieberman, A. (2000). Networks as learning communities, Shaping the future of teacher development. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51(3), 221-227.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Moos, L. (2003). Educational leadership: leadership for/as Bildung? *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 6(1), 19.
- Peters, J., Dobbins, R., & Johnson, B. (1996). *Restructuring and organisational culture* (4). Sydney: National Schools Network.