New South Wales Department of Education and Training

2011–2012 Hunter/Central Coast Region Leadership Fellowship Report

Excelling against the odds: Quality leadership in challenging primary schools

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Executive summary

This research report examines leaders in schools whose communities are diverse and complex in nature and where there is significant disadvantage. In such schools, social and economic circumstances can conspire to significantly decrease educational attainment, and in turn, life opportunities.

The research explored the experiences of schools in challenging communities which had embarked on a journey to make a real difference to the lives of their students. Universally these schools adopted the position that a child’s background was not sufficient explanation for underachievement. The report describes how these schools set about developing school communities that provided advantage where it was lacking, mentoring and support where it was needed, and school cultures with high ideals and high aspirations for all.

The research study included selected primary schools serving some of the most disadvantaged communities in England. They emerged from an Ofsted report that identified schools from low socio-economic backgrounds that had moved from a level of concern to schools with an unrelenting focus on the goal of raising attainment and achievement.

There were common characteristics that defined these schools, none more obvious than the centrality of the child and their inclusion in everything these schools did. The schools demonstrated rich and responsive curriculums, and consistently effective teaching and learning that were delivered by well-developed staff using data analytically to track pupils’ progress. The schools involved parents and their communities in the learning partnership which was seen as a critical element for sustaining an effective school community.

The research study found that quality leadership was one of the most important factors and an essential ingredient in promoting, supporting and sustaining the drive to perfect the art of teaching and learning in schools facing tough challenges. The report describes and interprets the leadership qualities, characteristics and applications that have led to these schools becoming highly effective and able to sustain this effectiveness over considerable periods of time.

The report presents a profile of leadership styles that, across all schools, was hallmarked by vision, values and very high expectations which so obviously shone through in all these school leaders. These leaders, without exception, were outstanding human beings, passionate about their schools and their students who ‘walked the walk’ and led by personal example.

Finally the report presents both school and system recommendations that readers can consider within their own contexts and use to analyse current practices and systems in their own schools. Most importantly the report challenges school leaders to reflect, explore, investigate, ponder and act on improving their own schools effectiveness and the role principals playing in the development and improvement of the achievement level of every student in their school.
1. Overview of the research study

This research was undertaken by Mr Graham Holmes, Principal Wyong Public School and the recipient of 2011–2012 Hunter/Central Coast Region Leadership Fellowship, awarded by the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities Deputy Director-General, Schools.

The purpose of the research study was to investigate the leadership styles, applications and levers that were facilitating outstanding outcomes for students in disadvantaged school communities in the United Kingdom. These schools are reported to be operating at a highly effective, outstanding level, with school leadership being upheld as the defining difference within the schools. The research involved visiting a number of these schools to analyse at first-hand what it was that they were doing that was allowing them to achieve remarkable results for students, excelling against considerable odds.

It included interviews with a number of leaders from various educational institutions and instrumentalities to obtain a deeper and richer view of how leadership is developed from a systemic viewpoint and how the leaders of these school communities develop the necessary skills they applied to bring about the improvements they have achieved.

2. Background information

The United Kingdom Office for Standards in Education, Children Services and Skills (Ofsted) published a report titled Twenty Outstanding Primary Schools Excelling Against the Odds, October 2009 which showcased 20 primary schools in the United Kingdom that received outstanding ratings on the last two inspectorial visits. These schools, the report states, ‘defy the association of disadvantage with low standards’ and can ‘show other schools how they can reduce the achievement gap between pupils of different backgrounds’. These schools served communities where pupils come from poor urban backgrounds. All of the schools had a high disadvantage intake, as indicated by over a quarter of pupils being eligible for free school meals (the main equity indicator in English schools). This figure is 50 percent above the national average. All the schools provided for socially and culturally diverse ranges of pupils and ranged in size from 200-600 students. Each school had achieved contextually value added (CVA) scores exceeding 100 for Key Stage 2 pupils in the Department of Children, Schools and Families performance tables. This report shared the journey of these schools which had come from an Ofsted “level of concern” position some years previously, to an “outstanding rating”.

The purpose of this study was to visit some of these schools and investigate how effective leadership had transformed the school communities and reduced the disparity of student achievement levels.

As a principal of a school that shares many similar characteristics of these schools it was of high interest to me and provided a professional imperative to investigate successful low socio-economic status schools. Wyong Public School was on the New
South Wales Priority School Program, the Low Socio-Economic Status School Communities National Partnership program and previously on the National Partnership Literacy program. The school is located in a high density government housing area with over 60 percent of students living in Department of Housing accommodation. The majority of other students live in low cost rental or privately owned housing, which is mingled within the government housing areas. Generational and long term unemployment typifies many families in the community and, as is the case with many disadvantaged areas, there is a high level of dysfunction within and between families. In many families there exists a poverty of hope or aspiration, poor productivity and in some families little emotional stability or moral direction. This often leads to students being the victims of their confused circumstances. This should not damn our community as there are many, many fine families who despite their problems, love their children and want the very best for them. They can be, and most often are very supportive of the school. This social profile indicates a community under the stress of low social and economic capital and their low capacities in responding to and managing their circumstances. The International Supply Chain Education Alliance (ICSEA) rating of the school is currently 918 points. Every school has an ICSEA value on a scale which has a median of 1000 and a standard deviation of 100. ICSEA values range from around 500 (representing extremely educationally disadvantaged backgrounds) to about 1300 (representing schools with students with very educationally advantaged backgrounds).

3. Research questions

1) How did these schools achieve outstanding ratings?
2) How do the schools sustain high levels of achievement?
3) What leadership features have had the greatest impact on their improvement and how are leaders in these schools supported in their development and in the discharge of their school leadership responsibilities?

4. Research methodology

A range of research methods were applied in the investigation.
They included:
1) Literature review of key documents relating to research area (included in Bibliography)
2) Visits to 8 schools to interview Headteachers and key school personnel. The schools included: Bonnor Public School; Orion Public School; Gateway Public School; John Burns Primary School; Michael Faraday School; Worlds End Infant and Nursery School; Banks Road Public School; Simonswood Primary School.
3) Interviews with the following people:
   b) Dr Alma Harris, Professor and Pro-Director (Leadership), Institute of Education, London
   c) Professor Kathryn Riley, Institute Education, London
d) Professor Pamela Sammons, Dean of Education, Oxford University, Oxford

e) Ms Sylvia Campbell, Manager International Business Unit, National College for School Leadership, Nottingham

f) Professor Pat Thompson, University of Nottingham
g) Dr Phillip Hood, University of Nottingham

h) Mr Ceri Morgan, Her Majesty’s Inspector, Ofsted, Manchester

5. Findings

5.1 How did these schools achieve outstanding ratings?

The unequivocal answer to this question provided by most people who were interviewed was ‘quality leadership’ and an ‘unbending commitment by all staff to the improvement of student learning outcomes’. While these school leaders exercised strong pedagogical leadership they also devoted much time to the transformation of school culture and most importantly to the beliefs of teachers.

In every school there was clear vision and purpose that could be articulated by every person interviewed. This vision was based on teachers ensuring that every child, regardless of background, had the opportunity to experience success. The Headteachers (principals) spent considerable time not only developing this culture but also checking that it lived and breathed in every classroom every day. In every school, classrooms were vibrant, creative and alive and teachers were excited about what they were doing and felt part of the mission and journey of the school. It was clear that these leaders had the innate ability to ‘transform’ cultures and were, without exception, outstanding individuals who possessed passion and a love of what they were doing. They also had great ability to develop staff and invest considerable resources in the ongoing professional learning of teachers.

In every school there existed a teaching and learning policy that described in great detail what “excellent” looked like. Based on Ofsted criteria of excellent teaching these documents provided the road map for consistent high quality teaching in every classroom, every day. There were many common characteristics between these schools that hallmarked their ability to achieve outstanding success with their students. In all schools there was well adapted curriculum that responds to the diversity and context of the student body. High quality planning, assessment and data tracking measures were present in all of these schools. Every student was plotted on continuums and every student knew where their learning was going to next.

Literacy and numeracy skills were systematically developed, ensuring that no student was left behind with good support for those students not achieving. Teachers’ aides who were highly trained in the delivery of support programs provided the support for students not progressing at the desired rate. Students in all of these schools were provided with support on every level. The needs of the child were seen holistically and every attempt was made to support a child struggling because of personal circumstances. Staff did not accept that family background or circumstances were beyond their responsibility and went to great measures to mitigate any conspiring personal circumstances that were affecting a student’s learning progress. They also
did not accept poor behaviour from students, upholding a strong commitment to the provision of orderly classroom and school environments where expected standards of behaviour were well known and adhered to by all.

5.2 How do the schools sustain high levels of achievement?

The leaders of these schools were well aware of the responsibility of sustaining the outstanding rating that they had achieved in the last two Ofsted inspections. As they had largely been responsible for this achievement they were all intrinsically motivated to sustain excellence. As they spoke, it was obvious that the commitment to school improvement was just part of the “DNA” of the school.

Headteachers spoke of the importance of investing in teacher leadership and providing opportunities for aspirant staff to become immersed in the school improvement program. Various formal and informal positions had been created to ensure that staff had the opportunity to ‘buy into’ the big picture. Literacy and numeracy leaders were present in every school and these leaders were not necessarily members of the executive team. They played a significant role in the development and implementation of the school’s literacy and numeracy programs. Some were paid positions, but where they were not they were supported through additional release time. The notion of teacher leadership and teamwork was strong in every school.

Also obvious was the concept of target setting by students who all possessed their own target books – called the ‘promise’ book in most schools. These targets aligned with carefully mapped out continuums and were congruent with the teaching and learning program being offered every five weeks. Teachers would constantly assess against these targets and produce tracking data which was utilised to analyse student performance against targets and against stage of learning expectations.

Target setting for children in schools in the United Kingdom is a natural part of the educational process and is almost second nature to students of all ages. Whilst students were encouraged to own their learning progress, teachers felt a high level of responsibility for the effectiveness of their teaching and learning programs. Every teacher I spoke to showed excitement about the progress of students and not once did I hear a teacher excuse performance because of the circumstances of the child. Teachers owned the results of their students. Teachers inculcated positive attitudes to learning with students, often working from a whole school theme – such as ‘you can do’ or, as it was the Olympic year, a theme of being ‘champions’ in their learning.

Parent involvement was encouraged in every school, with regular meetings and development programs being offered by the school in response to the contextual needs of the student population. Many communities had great ethnic diversity which in itself presented many challenges to engage the community but over and over I gained the impression that these schools had gone to extraordinary lengths to create a culture where ALL families were included regardless of their background.
5.3 What leadership features have had the greatest impact on their improvement and how are leaders in these schools supported in their development and in the discharge of their school leadership responsibilities?

It was without exception that every leader of these schools possessed vision, courage, conviction and determination in their pursuit of improvement in their schools. They held extremely high expectations which were well articulated, understood and shared across each school community. Most had started their leadership role as Headteachers with an autocratic approach taking full control and responsibility for the effectiveness and improvement of the school. In their early years they had led curriculum and pedagogy, created effective systems to support learning, ensuring that rigour and consistency existed in all areas and set standards that were unbending. It appeared that over time as the school began to improve their leadership style became more democratic spreading leadership responsibilities more broadly across the school. However, even when others were empowered with leadership opportunities they never wavered from their moral purpose and continued to build cultures and systems that supported the mission of the school.

These leaders went to great lengths to describe what quality looked like in terms of teaching, learning, classrooms, preparation and planning and well thought through documents were to be found describing what this looked like in these schools. Often it was done through teaching and learning policies but in the case of Orion Public School the Headteacher had developed a document he called the ‘Golden Learning Journey’. This document had great traction with both staff and students as it described how to make learning a successful journey every day, every week, every year, and it was used each week at assemblies as a tool to ‘tone up’ the school, creating for the whole community a sense of being able to be successful and a ‘you can do it’ culture.

School improvement teams which featured wide community participation facilitated key decision making in the school improvement process. Effective internal review processes led to the development of strategic plans that drove the improvement of each of these schools. Parents and families were engaged at every opportunity and were not only offered ongoing training but were genuinely and authentically utilised to support the learning of their children and other students.

Organisational structures were developed to facilitate the work of staff and the alignment of school teams with school priorities. This not only assisted in distributing leadership opportunities but also created a culture of ownership and responsibility for school improvement.

In these schools the Headteachers led innovation and ‘tinkering with’ the curriculum seemed to be an ongoing pastime. This ensured that the curriculum was responsive to the contextual requirements of the students in the school. They all managed and supported the teaching and learning programs of their schools. Headteachers commented on the importance of the early years and focused much support and resource on the development of programs that enhanced the learning of students prior to and during the reception (Kindergarten) year. An emphasis on play for learning pervaded the learning programs in these years.
These leaders built quality assessment and data systems making sure that they knew exactly at any one time where students were placed in their learning and more importantly what to do about it if they were failing to progress.

A commitment to sustained professional learning and support was a clear hallmark of these successful schools and each had thorough plans and policies to drive these areas. They understood how to develop people and led the professional learning programs in their schools.

In summary the leaders of these schools universally possessed extraordinary personal qualities that to a large extent created the tone, the culture and the success of the schools. Whilst much of their time was spent on leading the instructional programs, it was as much their success in this regard as it was their charismatic leadership style that led to their achievements. While in current thinking charismatic, transformational leadership is not popular as a sustained way to improve school effectiveness, it was certainly a noticeable and essential ingredient in the success of these schools.

6. Implications for leadership

The preceding text covers many of the implications for leaders in school communities that are serving challenging and complex communities. However, there are systemic influences in the United Kingdom that need to be considered.

While the inspectorial system in United Kingdom schools is not well supported in the research as a mechanism to drive school improvement, it has created a framework from which all these outstanding schools have built their teaching and learning programs and quality systems. The inspection system has led to a high degree of rigour within these schools and to the development of systems to support teaching and learning. As one Headteacher explained, “we work on the basis that the Ofsted inspectors will turn up on any given day and they will find our school to be outstanding in every respect”.

The RAISE online system is the universal data platform used by schools to track student performance against national standards. It is used by Ofsted inspectors as one way of judging school performance. The system played a significant role in building consistency and rigour in performance tracking in these schools. In addition the descriptors used by Ofsted to assess leadership, teaching and learning informed the development of policies, programs and procedures and thereby ensured that these schools emulated the desired practices of a quality school. The descriptors were used consistently by school leaders in an ongoing appraisal of school functioning and effectiveness.

The National College of School Leadership at Nottingham also plays a critical role in developing school leaders through the compulsory acquisition of a school leadership qualification prior to becoming a Headteacher. This has served to create consistent standards in the development of leaders across education in the United Kingdom.
7. Recommendations

**That the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities:**

1) Develop an online student performance data tracking system similar to RAISE online in the United Kingdom to allow ongoing measurement of student performance against State and National standards.

2) Develop a school assessment framework, similar to the Ofsted inspection framework, to facilitate a self-grading system of school effectiveness in a range of key areas.

3) Develop a school learning support officer training program giving access to higher levels of remuneration as officers progress through different accreditation levels.

**That the Department School Leadership Capability Framework**

1) Place greater emphasis on the interpersonal domain of the framework and give greater attention to this domain in aspiring leaders programs.

2) Encourage increased assessment of this domain through merit selection processes.

**That the Department Leadership Strategy:**

1) Require compulsory completion of a school leadership qualification at post graduate level prior to becoming a school principal.

2) Provide formal mentoring and coaching support for aspiring and early career principals.

3) Encourage increased assessment of the interpersonal domain through merit selection processes.

**That Principals in their schools:**

1) Develop strong data systems that not only track the progress of individual students but also profile the performance of groups of students as they move through the school. The performance data should be measured against expected stages of learning outcomes and be collected on a regular basis for example every five weeks.

2) Ensure the use of literacy and numeracy continuums to set targets and to track student performance. Teachers need to account for student performance through presentation of data profiles to supervisors on a regular basis for example every five weeks.

3) Become visionary leaders with drive, determination and passion and establish high expectations within their school communities.

4) Be strategic about building the school community – conducting community engagement programs that are connected to student learning outcomes.

5) Invest considerable resource and time in the training of school learning support officers, enabling them to support the delivery of quality teaching and learning programs.

**That aspiring leaders in schools**

1) Undertake a formal school leadership qualification at a post graduate level.
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