
Teachers as leaders – an exploratory framework

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Based on a study of the leadership approaches of highly successful teachers and paraprofessionals who work in socioeconomically disadvantaged school communities, presents a preliminary framework for teacher leadership, in which aspects of transformational and educative approaches to leadership are evident with strategic approaches less so. Concludes that the work of highly successful teachers is not sufficiently recognized in the development of most theories of educational leadership. This may be particularly the case with theories that originate in corporate and managerial systems, raising serious doubts about the potential of much existing theory to meet the needs of the education profession in emerging educational contexts.

Introduction

Educational leadership is a fascinating but slippery concept. Hundreds of definitions have been offered since research into leadership developed as a serious academic undertaking in the immediate post-war period. However, two points are generally agreed on. First, leadership is a group function requiring human interaction. Second, leadership involves intentional influence on the behaviour of others.

Until very recently, educational leadership has tended to be construed as associated with ascribed authority and position – for example, school administration or system directorship. The idea of educational leadership as involving practising teachers and paraprofessionals as central figures has been a seriously underdeveloped topic, although terms like superior-subordinate and leader-follower, which were once standard usage in educational administration texts, and which tend to cast teachers in positions of relative dependency and powerlessness, are now less commonly used.

This article presents findings from a study[1] of 15 highly effective teachers and paraprofessionals – individuals acclaimed not only for their pedagogical excellence, but also for their influence in stimulating change and creating improvement in the schools and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities in which they work. Do the decisions and actions of practitioners such as these imply processes and concepts in educational leadership? If so, what is the relevance to their work of leadership theories that are prominent in educational management? It is these questions that guided the study and that provide the focus of this article.

Research design and methodology

The study originated through meetings and informal discussions of educational administrators who had been responsible for monitoring government-funded compensatory education projects that were designed to ameliorate the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage. The administrators had observed

that some members of their staff had achieved striking successes in working towards this end. They recognized that financial, technical and human support services made available through the projects had undoubtedly been a significant factor in these achievements. However, they also believed that practitioners who appeared to them to be highly successful exerted an influence that transcended the requirements of funded projects.

In September 1995, researchers in the School Leadership Institute at the University of Southern Queensland were contracted to explore the following research problem:

What characteristics distinguish the work of a sample of educators who have achieved success in working in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools? What forms of educational leadership are inherent in these characteristics?

Criteria to facilitate the identification of official participants in the research were developed jointly by the researchers and representatives of the administrator group. Four criteria were endorsed as indicating evidence of success in responding to socioeconomic disadvantage:

- 1 concrete evidence of a significant contribution to an aspect of social justice in the school or the school community;
- 2 highly esteemed in the community, particularly among socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals and groups;
- 3 recognized by colleagues as very influential in school decision-making processes;
- 4 accorded a high level of school-based responsibility by colleagues and the school administration.

These criteria were believed to take into account the intents of indices of socioeconomic disadvantage that are used to distribute compensatory education funds in a number of Australian states. As described by Batten[2], such indices tend to “relate to the key socioeconomic factors of income, occupation, unemployment and education”. Indices of this type were believed to have direct relevance in the geographic area in question, where unemployment levels approach 20 per cent and are among the highest in Australia.

The criteria also appeared to be sensitive to the “five faces of oppression” framework developed by Young[3]. Young’s contention is that each “face” – namely marginalization, powerlessness, exploitation, cultural domination and violence – can exist independently but that multiple interactions are common. Some schools in the area of the research have a majority of aboriginal students and very high levels of transience, in addition to problems associated with severe unemployment. Young’s framework therefore seemed to provide a helpful theoretical background for exploring meanings ascribed to disadvantage in schools in the area.

Fifteen school-based practitioners were identified by the administrators as meeting the four criteria. Thirteen of the practitioners were teachers and two were paraprofessionals. Ten were female and five were male. Nine were employed in primary schools (years one to seven) and five in secondary schools. All agreed to participate with the university researchers in a joint, six-week inquiry of their work.

Data relevant to the research problem were collected through a range of procedures. First, extensive use was made of a critical incident strategy. Each of the 15 participants recorded written descriptions of their perceptions of, and educational responses to, specific situations involving socioeconomic disadvantage as these occurred in their workplaces across a four-week period (mid-October to mid-November 1995). In total, 43 incidents were described by the 15 participants and made available to the researchers for study and follow-up inquiry.

Second, on-site interviews of approximately one hour were held with each of the 15 participants. Interviews were structured to facilitate understanding of participants’ decisions and actions in responding to disadvantage, and to explore processes associated with the high levels of influence that they were perceived to have in their school communities. Interviews were also conducted with two or more administrators and teachers at each site to explore colleagues’ perceptions of these same processes.

Finally, two three-hour focus group sessions were held with the 15 participants, one prior to commencement of the site-based recording of critical incidents, and the other at the culmination of site-based activities. These sessions engaged participants in reflection about their work and in dialogue with each other regarding the types of leadership that appear most able to stimulate educational achievement in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools and communities.

A three-stage approach was taken to the data analysis. First, an holistic profile was prepared for each of the 15 participants. Second, descriptive data were quantified and categorized to generate conceptualizations of disadvantage, educational strategies and leadership. Finally, tentative research findings were tested with project participants to ascertain levels of perceived credibility. Adjustments were made to several statements of outcomes following these consultations.

The conceptual framework

The possibility that leadership might be a function of the work of teachers has only recently begun to be accorded serious consideration. Attempts to conceptualize teacher leadership appeared to make some headway in US education reforms in the 1980s, most notably as an outcome of research into collegial approaches to school improvement. Berry and Ginsberg[4] identified three components of the role of a new cadre of professional educators, whom they called “lead teachers”:

- 1 mentoring and coaching other teachers;
- 2 professional development and review of school practice; and
- 3 school-level decision making.

In a helpful study of successful school-based teams in which principals played facilitative, supportive roles, Lieberman *et al.*[5] identified 18 skills that were manifested by teacher leaders. These they classified as:

- building trust and rapport;
- organizational diagnosis;
- dealing with the process;
- using resources;
- managing the work;
- building skill and confidence in others.

Smylie and Denny[6] and Smylie and Brownlee-Conyers[7] cite a range of “teacher leadership opportunities” that have emerged as a result of the promotion of shared decision making between teachers and administrators, creation of school-based instructional teams, and teachers’ involvement in school governance. These “opportunities” tend to be consistent in nature with the responsibilities delineated by both Lieberman *et al.*[5] and Berry and Ginsberg[4]. In all cases, however, it might be observed that attempts to conceptualize teachers’ leadership roles pay limited attention to leadership approaches that have emerged in educational management across the past decade. The relevance to the work of teachers of theories of leadership that are used in educational management remains relatively unexplored.

In Australian education, perhaps the first significant recognition of practising teachers' potential leadership capabilities occurred in the late 1980s through the vehicle of policy, with the creation in all states and territories of Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) industrial awards. Research into the work practices of ASTs has yet to confirm, however, that they have either the opportunities or capabilities to engage in authentic leadership roles. Whether difficulties associated with the classification derive from the culture of schools and the teaching profession, or whether they derive from abuses of industrial processes, has been a topic of ongoing debate. Some researchers, including Chadbourne and Ingvarson[8] and Crowther and Gaffney[9], have suggested that the latter alternative is more plausible than the former. The possibility also exists, however, that criteria for leadership that have been employed to examine the work of practitioners in cases such as these are themselves inadequate or inappropriate.

Certainly, consideration of the topic of teacher leadership appears to have focused mainly on teachers' capacity to assume high levels of responsibility in managerial aspects of school organization. However, it should not be taken for granted that this capacity necessarily constitutes "educational leadership". To illuminate this essential point, three leadership approaches that have acquired credibility in contemporary educational management theory and practice are discussed briefly. Each is used subsequently as a reference point in the analysis of research data and discussion of research findings.

Strategic leadership

The view that leadership is primarily a function of "strategy" is certainly not new. It reflects the ideology of logical empiricism that shaped educational administration as a discipline until the 1980s[10] and bears considerable resemblance to the two-dimensional (i.e. task-relationships) conceptualizations of leadership that were developed in the 1950s and 1960s and that have dominated leadership research until the very recent past. With the emergence over the past decade of a widespread view of the principal or head as chief executive and entrepreneurial marketer in a self-managing school, this particular conception of leadership may be said to have gained new momentum and status.

As the term implies, strategic leadership emphasizes rationality in the leader's role. Thus, Hosmer, cited in Shrivastava and Nachman[11], defines it as the creation of an overall sense of purpose and direction which guide integrated strategy formulation and implementation in organizations.

Hambrick[12] suggests that it involves aligning the organization with anticipated external forces – technological developments, market trends, regulatory constraints, competitors' actions, and so on. In similar vein to Hosmer and Hambrick, Caldwell[13] advocates a leadership function that is dominantly strategic as the most appropriate approach for principals in self-managing schools:

...the principal must be able to develop and implement a cyclical process of goal-setting, need identification, priority setting, policy making, planning, budgeting, implementing and evaluating in a manner which provides for the appropriate involvement of staff and community, including parents and students as relevant (p. 160).

Strategic processes such as these may be highly relevant in conceptualizing the work of successful school managers of the 1990s. But what meanings, if any, do they have in the work of highly successful classroom practitioners and other non-managers? This question remains largely unconsidered in educational leadership literature.

Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership emphasizes the significance of "the person", and personal traits, in bringing about social and cultural change.

To Avolio and Bass[14], whose pioneering research has been instrumental in developing transformational approaches to leadership, leaders are individuals who "motivate followers to work for transcendental goals instead of immediate self-interest and for achievement and self-actualization instead of safety and security". Avolio and Bass further assert that transformational leadership comprises three elements:

- 1 *Charisma*. The leader instils pride, faith and respect, has a gift for seeing what is really important, and has a sense of vision which is effectively articulated.
- 2 *Individualized consideration*. The leader delegates projects to stimulate and create learning experience, pays attention to followers' needs, especially those followers who seem neglected, and treats each follower with respect and as an individual.
- 3 *Intellectual stimulation*. The leader provides ideas that result in a rethinking of old ways, that is, the leader enables followers to look at problems from many angles and to resolve problems that were at a standstill[14, p. 137].

Transformational leadership is generally regarded as having originated in the work of Burns[15]. It would appear to have relevance to the work of teachers as leaders if for no

other reason than that Burns regarded “leadership as education” and “education as leadership”. The essence of leadership, Burns asserted, is one of relationship, or engagement, and of common elevation of motives or values. It gains strength when pluralistic qualities inherent in groups and communities are recognized. Differences based on gender, ethnicity, race and culture are therefore important. With regard to gender, for example, Burns[15] claimed that:

The male bias is reflected in the false conception of leadership as mere command or control. As leadership comes properly to be seen as a process of leaders engaging and mobilizing the human needs and aspirations of followers, women will be more readily recognized as leaders and men will change their own leadership styles (p. 50).

Transformational concepts like “empowerment”, “vision” and “mission” have become a feature of the rhetoric associated with developmental processes at different levels in education systems throughout the world. They are to be found, for example, in the strategic plans of departments of education, in the annual plans of regional authorities and in school-based development plans. But is there opportunity in modern, corporate education systems for practitioners with deep personal convictions to inspire social change and improvement, individually or collaboratively. The implications of recent developments in transformational leadership for the school and classroom levels of education are thus extremely complex.

Educative leadership

Educative leadership is often viewed as linked to social reconstructionist philosophy. For Bates[16], the essential point about leadership in education is that it “involves the making and articulating of choices, the location of oneself within the cultural struggles of the times as much in the cultural battles of the school as in the wider society” (p. 19). For Foster[17], “leadership is at its heart a critical practice”, involving educational leaders in the necessary practice of reflective and critical thinking about the culture of their organizations (p. 52). Both Bates and Foster could be said to emphasize educative approaches to leadership.

Duignan and Macpherson[18] cite writers like Deal and Kennedy, Purkey and Smith, and Starratt in creating a definition of educative leadership that involves continuous critical discourse and social action as a means of addressing social injustice and disadvantage in an organization:

Educative leadership appears to be a deliberate attempt at cultural elaboration... It

follows that educative leadership must closely respond to the cultural context, be critically aware of the long-term practices of participants in educational processes, and when action is proposed, justify ends and processes using an educative philosophy... Hence, educative leadership implies a responsible involvement in the politics of the organization (pp. 3-4).

In similar vein, Smyth[19] challenges practitioners to “frame problems, and to discuss and work individually and collectively to understand and change the situations that cause these problems”. As Fried expressed it, empowerment as used in this sense means helping people to take charge of their lives, people who have been restrained, by social or political forces, from assuming such control. Implicit in Smyth’s challenge is the view that, if education is to create emancipation or liberation in the human condition, it will be unlikely to do so through the sole influence of administrators. Indeed, Smyth contends that the notion of educative leadership is itself a misnomer in that leadership as traditionally defined implies hierarchical division of power and corporate direction setting, while educativeness implies the opposite, namely “assisting people to understand themselves and their world... to overcome the oppressive conditions that characterize work patterns and social relationships” (p. 182).

The relevance of educative concepts and processes to the work of school administrators has been recognized[20], but their relevance to the work of teachers and other practitioners remains largely unexplored. The present study represents a step in addressing this void.

Findings of the research

Conceptualizations of disadvantage

The exploration of teacher leadership that was the major focus of the research cannot be viewed in isolation from the major contextual variable, socioeconomic disadvantage. Thus, before research findings relating to teacher leadership are reviewed, it is appropriate to consider the meanings ascribed by participants in the research to disadvantage.

From an analysis of the 43 critical incident statements provided by participants, supported by interview data, it is possible to identify four different conceptualizations of disadvantage that were perceived to impose on schools and students (Table I). The four conceptualizations encompass one or another form of deficit in social competence, material means, relationship with the law and attitude towards school. Of relevance is that most

Table I
Conceptualizations of disadvantage

Conceptualizations	Specific examples	N (Critical incident references)
<i>Inappropriate social competences</i>		
Reluctance to co-operate with authority figures	"You can't make me"	6
Very aggressive approach to social intercourse	Hostile, threatening language	4
Bullying of peers	Gender-based harassment in play area	4
Total		14
<i>Lack of material means</i>		
No support for school attendance or participation	"No one cares if I don't come to school"	6
No resources to meet basic needs	Unable to purchase school uniform	3
Total		9
<i>At risk with the law</i>		
Demonstrated criminal background or tendency	Stealing, brandishing a weapon, drug abuse	4
Abuse of welfare system	Illegal claim of welfare benefits	3
Ambiguous legal status	Victim in custody battle	2
Total		9
<i>Alienated from schooling</i>		
History of personal failure	"I can't do anything"	5
History of family failure at school	Parents' school experiences were associated with fear	3
Victim of poor teaching	Negative influence of Teacher X	3
Total		11
Total		43

descriptions of disadvantage that were provided by the research participants encompassed two or more of the four conceptualizations. Also of interest is that there is no indication in the descriptions that any one conceptualization is more significant in overall impact than the others.

Based on the two sources of data that were considered, socioeconomic disadvantage is regarded by project participants as characterized by a number of complex factors that would appear to make it very difficult to redress. First, disadvantaged students are perceived as confronting a range of barriers which are beyond their control. For example, some participants observed that disadvantaged children in their schools are part of a "culture of unemployment" that spans four generations and that manifests in practicalities like lack of funds to participate in enrichment activities and attitudes that are socially unacceptable.

Second, some participants indicated that individuals affected by various forms of disadvantage may be subject to pressures to attempt to obscure, deny or change their circumstances in order that institutions, including schools, may feel that their efforts

in meeting societally prescribed expectations have been successful. Teachers of disadvantaged children may themselves begin to feel disadvantaged if they are unable to meet externally-defined criteria for success.

Thus, participants' perspectives on socioeconomic disadvantage related closely to their everyday experiences in disadvantaged schools. This point is an important consideration in interpreting the framework for teacher leadership that emerged from the research.

Conceptualizations of leadership

At the end-of-research focus session, participants engaged in a process of individual reflection, small group sharing and total group discussion of the question: What do you regard as the essential characteristics of leadership in addressing disadvantage in schools? In preparing for this activity, participants had been provided with detailed descriptions of tentative outcomes of the research, as well as descriptions of their own preliminary profiles. A summary entitled "Essential characteristics of leadership" was then prepared by the participants. With

minor editorial modifications, this summary is reproduced in Table II.

Thus, the framework for teacher leadership that is proposed is based on detailed external analyses of teachers' work as well as processes of individual and collegial self-reflection. However, the five generalized characteristics in the framework should not be interpreted as an explanatory system that captures the individual leadership approaches of participants in the research. To the contrary, individual profiles reflected uniqueness of personality, belief and context at least as much as they did the five generalized characteristics. One participant, for example, dwelt heavily on issues associated with chronic unemployment in articulating a personal philosophy and in describing her response in creating and implementing ongoing work experience projects in conjunction with the local business community. A second participant, at the same school, focused on the problems of students "at risk" with the

Table II
Teachers as leaders: a suggested framework

<i>Articulates clear views of a better world</i>
Can articulate "what ought to be" on important social issues
Values teaching as an important profession in shaping meaning systems
Personal views about social justice are a source of personal pride
<i>Models trust and sincerity</i>
Has the respect of the community
Demonstrates tolerance and reasonableness in difficult situations
Regarded by peers as totally trustworthy
<i>Confronts structural barriers</i>
Stands up for children, especially marginalized or powerless groups
Engages confidently with authority figures
Influences the development and implementation of socially just policies
<i>Builds networks of support</i>
Feels at ease with individuals and groups who assert cultural, social and other differences
Communicates with authority and persuasion across groups
Promotes collaboration in teaching, planning, decision making
Organizes tasks with relative ease
<i>Nurtures a culture of success</i>
Creates opportunities for individual success and recognition
Builds problem-solving skills
Adopts a "no blame" attitude when things go wrong
Searches continuously for new ideas
Conveys a sense of optimism to others

law. His work took him, by invitation, into homes, police stations and, on occasion, out-of-control teenage parties on Saturday nights. A third participant had developed and implemented across a period of years an initiative to enable year-seven students in his community to live for a week in an aboriginal community in preparation for cross-cultural secondary schooling. Longstanding distrust and bitterness between the two communities had not been overcome by this action, but the initiative enjoyed the support of both communities and also the strong endorsement of staff at both schools. In each of these instances, the salient point is the unique way that conviction, action and dialogue led to new forms of understanding in the community.

Cautions regarding the use of Table II notwithstanding, the work of each of the 15 participants in the research illustrated each of the five characteristics. The relevance of essential principles of contemporary leadership theories to the work of the designated teacher leaders is therefore able to be considered through reference to the framework.

First, Table II reflects concrete evidence of transformational, educative and strategic approaches to leadership. Most readily apparent is the transformational framework. School-based educators who were identified as highly successful in their work in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools tended to be motivated by transcendental goals that derived from a deep concern for marginalized and powerless groups and individuals. In most, if not all instances, participants espoused an uncompromising commitment to values like fair go, cross-cultural understanding, individual responsibility and community pride. While it must be said that these values had somewhat different meanings to different participants, all 15 had clear views about social issues that they were very willing to voice publicly. (Thus, discussions at focus sessions were in some instances passionate, as individual convictions surfaced and posed challenges for others, including the researchers.) Relatedly, all were characterized by contagious enthusiasm, an ability to inspire others to raise their expectations, and a pervasive sense of optimism.

Transformational aspects of leadership that were evident in participants' work did, however, show one important variation from general principles of transformational theory. That is, the teacher leaders who were studied did not view themselves as either charismatic or as exercising undue influence. In particular, the leader-follower mindset that continues to dominate in the rhetoric of much transformational theory was not at all evident in their thinking or their actions, based on the descriptions of their work that were provided.

Also present in the data is a strong educative aspect. Indeed, influence in shaping the culture of schools and communities appears to depend on considerably more than the existence of transformational qualities like personal conviction and social vision. Research participants saw themselves, and were seen by their colleagues and administrators, as engaged continuously in practical problem solving on terms, and in surroundings, determined by others. Positional authority and regulation tended to be called on only when questions of safety, health or natural justice arose. Stated a little differently, the 15 participants tended to view themselves as collaborators in emancipatory and consciousness-raising activities, and quite frequently as advocates for marginalized or powerless individuals in challenging authority structures – but not as agents of external agendas for social change.

The forms of educative leadership that were evident in the research data deviate from the principles of most educative theories in one important respect. That is, educative theories tend to view the cultural context of teachers' work as focusing on the school as an organization. In this sense, they would seem to be too restrictive to explain satisfactorily the community-wide sphere of action and influence of those educators who participated in the research.

Of less direct significance, but important nevertheless, is strategic leadership. While most, perhaps all, of the 15 participants were regarded as sound organizers, adept at team building and highly influential in school decision making, these capabilities tended to be construed by both participants and their peers as means to an end rather than as important processes in their own right. Table II indicates that the notion of "strategy", as a rational process of goal setting, needs identification and policy making did not figure prominently in the thinking of research participants. Nevertheless, participants tended to acknowledge the impetus provided by special project funding. They also insisted that the assistance of school administrators in establishing socially-just organizational goals was vitally important to them. Most also agreed that Department of Education equity policies were of help, asserting that their work would retain its focus if such policies did not exist, but would undoubtedly be more difficult to carry out.

A second implication of the research is that leadership in the work of successful practitioners appears to incorporate a quality which is not found in leadership theories that have their origins in business management or, for the most part, in educational management. That is, processes of teaching,

consciousness raising, community building and personal learning were inseparable in descriptions of their work that were offered by participants in the research. When holistic profiles were analysed to identify general characteristics of leadership, it proved to be very difficult to differentiate the instructional roles of participants from their roles as influential figures in their schools and communities. An important irony is evident here in that the historical failure of educational theorists to recognize leadership dimensions in teachers' work may be partly attributable to the insistence of highly successful teachers, such as the participants in this research, that their primary concern is "to teach".

Of possible importance, also, is that the language of participants in the research included very few references to the terminology that is often associated with leadership, raising further doubt as to whether teacher leaders work in the same paradigm of leadership that has evolved out of the study of educational management. Terms such as "transformational", "task-oriented", "strategy formulation", "charismatic", "bias-for-action", "team building" and "change agent", which figure prominently in descriptions of leadership roles of school administrators, are conspicuously absent from the descriptions that were provided by research participants or others who described their work. Rather, terms like "wildly enthusiastic", "lives and breathes worthy causes", "values friends", "admits failures" and "always on the lookout for new ideas" tended to characterize the dialogue.

Finally, it seems possible on the basis of this research to propose a definition of teacher leadership. Teacher leadership is essentially an ethical stance that is based on views of both a better world and the power of teaching to shape meaning systems. It manifests in actions that involve the wider community and leads to the creation of new forms of understanding that will enhance the quality of life of the community in the long term. It reaches its potential in contexts where system and school structures are facilitative and appreciative.

Suggestions for further inquiry

Thus, it seems that the work of some teachers reflects clear evidence of both authoritative leadership theories and forms of influence that are not encompassed by theories that originate in educational or corporate management.

Further research is essential in a number of areas. First, it is unclear to what extent the particular socioeconomic context of the present research influenced outcomes. That is, whether a framework like that in Table II

would have emerged from similar research in other social, cultural or educational settings is deserving of investigation. Second, there are suggestions in this research that some authoritative leadership approaches may be at least as relevant to the work of teachers as they are to the work of school managers. Administrators in the research themselves suggested that political and managerial aspects of their work militate strongly against their being able to assume transformational and educative leadership functions that some teachers in their schools were able to realize. With the prospect of increasing managerialism and corporatism in school administration, the potential of these theoretical approaches in the work of managers on the one hand, and teachers on the other, would seem to warrant ongoing thought and inquiry. Third, the strategic/transformational/educative approaches to leadership that provided the conceptual umbrella for this research are presented as illustrations of contemporary theory, rather than as comprehensive prescriptions. Other leadership approaches might also be revealed in teachers' work if they were explored. Fourth, assuming that an authoritative paradigm of teacher leadership can in fact be illuminated further, the question of how it might be nurtured and refined in the teaching profession would seem to pose a challenge of immense importance. Finally, one must ask Why? That is, why has leadership theory in education presumed that positional authority is so critical? What effects has this presumption had on the image and culture of the teaching profession? And how can we begin to make amends for the obvious limitations of our own past understandings as educational theorists, scholars and practitioners?

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