TEACH[R]

The nexus between principals' leadership characteristics and primary teachers' response to challenges of change

Teachers are functioning on the outside but how are they coping on the inside?

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Abstract

Significant change is occurring in the education systems in most countries around the world. This article, based on a larger educational change study, examines perceptions of Australian primary teachers employed within the Seventh-day Adventist Church education system (Adventist Schools Australia, ASA) regarding the impact of change. Teachers indicated that an increase in parent expectations is having a significant impact on their ability to manage change, both functionally and emotionally. It was found that the leaders in this system are perceived to be relatively effective across nine leadership characteristics. Modelling, based on linear regression, suggests that teachers perceived that different leadership constructs are needed to enable teachers to successfully deal with change functionally, emotionally and with a positive view of future change. In addition, teachers perceived that leaders are best able to support the change process when they are *Relators* and *Collegial Managers*. However, the *Adaptor*, which was the highest significantly significant construct, has a negative impact on the change process as the teachers perceived it.

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Introduction

In an educational context, the modern world is fast, compressed, complex and uncertain; this presents new problems and challenges everyday for school systems and the teachers who work in them (Fullan, 2005, p. 127). The compression of time and space is creating accelerated change, innovation overload and intensification in teachers' work. Further, as Hargreaves, (1994, p. 9) suggests, ideological uncertainty is challenging the Judaeo-Christian tradition on which many school systems have been based, raising crises of identity and purpose in relation to what their new missions might be. This is also the case in the ASA setting.

Teaching has become harder than ever before because of the impact of these changes. Shrinking budgets, critical media headlines, crowded curricula, increased cases of litigation and unrealistic expectations (from the teachers' perspective) impact day-to-day teaching. Collectively they can ultimately undermine a teacher's sense of adequacy and self-respect, and may lead to low levels of motivation and career satisfaction.

A motivated staff is a powerful catalyst for school improvement. Competent leadership by the principal is seen to be essential to build and nurture the motivation of staff, particularly to engage in change. In Fullan's (2005, p. 127) view, motivation is the key to engaging in change, he asserts that "the holy grail of change is to know under what conditions hordes of people become motivated to change".

Competent leadership involves the optimising of the human resources available in any organisation. Leaders need to be sensitive to the needs and experiences of supervised colleagues and help to develop their skills and qualities to the advantage of the individual and to the benefit of the organisation as a whole. It is the principal's responsibility and role to lead effective change thereby avoiding crisis and chaos as well as staff alienation, dissatisfaction and detachment from change.

This article, based on a larger educational change study, contributes new insights for leaders by linking previously identified research on desirable leadership attributes to specific 'levels' teachers deal with change—managing in a *functional* sense, coping in an *emotional* sense and being willing to positively view change in a *future* sense. It examines perceptions of primary teachers employed within ASA schools regarding the aspects and extent of change within the education scene that impact on their practice. Further, it explores these teachers' views on how school leaders can best help them deal with the challenges resulting from constant change in their work environment.

Literature Review

Leadership

Research has shown that leadership within the school, particularly that of the principal, has a significant influence on the success of school change and improvement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). McEwan (2003) contends that certain leadership characteristics or styles are central to enabling teachers to deal successfully with the challenges associated with change.

One such style is a collective and shared leadership style (Spillane, 2006, p. 18) often termed a devolved leadership style, where power is shared among layers of leaders within the school. Relationships between administrative and teaching staff have been identified as one layer of this devolved model. For successful change to occur, teachers and administrators need to be connected. Fratz (1989) suggested that competent principals support improvements that are responsive to the classroom context and provide support for teaching staff and, in doing so, reaffirm the linkage between administration and teaching.

Communication between administration and teaching staff is a crucial variable in the implementation of school change (Murphy, 1994); however, ethos is central to a good connection between the two entities. In order to facilitate and maintain change that gains the support of teachers, and enhances understanding and support of these teachers, the ethos of the school administration needs to move from the generally bureaucratic-type task orientation to more people-orientated leadership styles and managerial practices (Frederick, 1992).

The devolved or distributed leadership model (Gronn, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2006; Hatcher, 2005; Spillane, 2006) has had a significant influence on change management in recent years. Although there is little agreement as to the meaning of this style of leadership, it is suggested that it be considered a 'way of thinking about leadership' rather than a strategy, technique or model. Transformational leadership, which is visionary and "provides intellectual direction and aims at innovating within the organisation while empowering and supporting teachers as partners in decision making" (Marks & Printy, 2003, p. 371) provides a 'thinking' framework within which devolved leadership could develop.

Sustainable planned growth and development of a school requires leaders (and participants) to have an understanding and appreciation of the factors that influence the change process. Planning and monitoring changes is necessary, for as Kimbrough and Burkett (1990, p. 127) observe, "Change can be achieved without realising the desired improvement, but it is impossible to have improvement without having change." Leadership is tasked with shaping change within unique environments and by differing locally appropriate processes to achieve desirable outcomes. Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL, 2000, p. 3) report that all educational institutions in Australia face change processes that are fundamentally different not because the institutions are fundamentally different (although they may be) but because there are distinctly different change processes occurring.

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Change

Incremental change has been identified as being part of a normal aspect of the ordinary life of any organisation. It is the basic adjusting of current patterns of behaviour and action to address the ever-changing environment in which the organisation or school functions.

Fundamental change, on the other hand, is the kind of change that typically involves altering the very essence or identity of a system—in other words, transforming the system (Reardon, Reardon & Rowe, 1998, p. 133). It requires that teachers "depart drastically from the status quo and often that they do so in a limited period of time". Frequently, knowledge and understanding are lacking, current skills fall short of those required and potential outcomes are difficult to define.

wIn general terms, whether the change is incremental or fundamental, the perceived impact will consequently influence the kind of feelings that teachers experience. The greater the number or scope of changes teachers encounter, the more likely they are to experience feelings of stress and inadequacy. McREL's (2000, p. 5) research concluded that because deep changes are so unsettling, many prefer incremental change, even though this kind of relatively focused change may be insufficient in a given situation. Dealing with problems incrementally is

Table 1: Nine leadership characteristics

The nine constructs were:	
The leader as a *Change Communicator*:	where the leader communicates the need for and importance of change
The leader as a *Feedback Provider*:	where the leader provides effective feedback relating to teachers' professional work
The leader as a *Professional Developer*:	where the leader provides opportunities for teachers to be involved in relevant professional development
The leader as a *Relator*:	where the leader relates well to and empathises with staff, having a personal approach and is open and honest
The leader as a *Learning Facilitator*:	where the leader enhances the learning environment
The leader as a *Collegial Manager*:	where the leader has a participative and inclusive management style, being an active listener and empowering others
The leader as a *Analyst*:	where the leader is able to deal proficiently with a significant volume of data and evaluate context
The leader as a *Adaptor*:	where the leader is able to demonstrate a changing leadership style as is needed
The leader as a *Change Implementer*:	where the leader is able to facilitate the change, convincing the staff to contribute to and be involved in this change process

much more familiar and, therefore, more comfortable for most teachers. A fundamental change, on the other hand, requires teachers to learn new ways of interacting with problems and stakeholders.

The fact that incremental change is more comfortable for most teachers, should not motivate those implementing or leading change to fall back on incremental change over fundamental or rapid change. There are times when the change process should function in small, incremental and, therefore, generally less threatening steps. Nevertheless, there are also circumstances when, for the sake of school improvement and student learning, fundamental change is necessary. The impact of change on individuals needs to be addressed, though it cannot be the sole consideration to the exclusion of moving an education system or school in more productive directions.

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Change has an impact on people's lives, stories, hopes and identity. As Stoll (2001, p. 39) observes, "The human side of change is all too often ignored. Change is an intensely personal experience." The effectiveness of the change process will be influenced by the degree to which teachers understand the conditions that led to the need for change and indicate their willingness to personally engage in the process. Leadership practices can influence and shape both understanding and commitment.

In an Australian study, Hubbard and Samuel (2002), assert that organisations should uphold *captain–coach* leadership. Interestingly, this leadership style represents a key difference between Australian findings and those in other countries. Australians' expectations of leadership are not that of generals providing subordinates with a vision and telling them what to do. Instead, Australians want their leaders to be coaches who are 'with them on the field', building effective relationships and providing a cause to follow (Hubbard & Samuel, 2002). Coaching is about becoming a partner in the team-member's journey toward enhanced competence and effectiveness, along with enabling teachers to deal successfully with the challenges associated with change. The impact the various leadership styles have on ASA primary teachers, however, is unknown.

Methodology

Data for this quantitative component of the study was collected using an empirical survey completed by 282 (66%) of the 425 primary teachers within the ASA system from 48 (84%) out of a total of 51 primary schools.

The validity and reliability of the survey items were the major controlling factors in the selection of the respective construct items. Consultants used to examine the validity of the survey were, or had been, teachers in the Seventh-day Adventist Church education system thus providing an increased likelihood of having, or being aware of, views similar to those of the respondents, views that could shape responses to the survey. The consultants' input was

Table 2: I am able to deal with the impact of change at work

	not dealing well	dealing well
Coping	35%	65%
Managing	25%	75%
Willingness to face change in the future	17%	83%

compared and finally derived using a modified Delphi Technique (Hsu & Sandford, 2007, p. 1).

The reliability of the survey was enhanced by piloting the collection of data from a sample group of schools in New Zealand which are very similar to those for whom the instrument was designed.

The empirical survey consisted of three sections. Section One of the survey included seven questions on demographics. Section Two included 39 statements, 38 of which required the respondent to rate (using a 6 point Likert scale) the leadership characteristics of his/her principal or head of primary school. Factor analysis of these items generated nine leadership characteristics or constructs (Table 1). The remaining question, the leader "effectively assists in implementing change within the school environment", was considered an outcome. The nine leader characteristics chosen are not intended to be an exhaustive list; however, they cover most of the characteristics identified in the literature and pilot phase.

Section Three of the survey included 37 statements requesting respondents to rate themselves in terms of dealing with the challenges associated with change.

Three statements (using a dichotomous scale, well or not well) investigated how the respondents perceived they were dealing with challenges associated with change. The first related to how they were ***managing***, in a ***functional sense***, the impact of change factors. *Manage* implied the ability to be 'on top' of the changes at work and see themselves to be 'doing well' in their professional roles in spite of the impact of surrounding change. The second statement addressed perceptions of the degree to which they were ***coping*** in an ***emotional sense***, with the impact of the change factors. The third statement questioned the extent to which the respondents were ***willing*** to deal with the impact of ***future*** change factors.

One statement investigated the extent to which the respondents perceived their *spiritual commitment/service orientation* assisted them to deal successfully with the impact of change.

Three statements assessed respondents' perception of the extent of change taking place across three specific areas, society's expectations, parental expectations, and rate of change in the curriculum.

The final 30 statements in Section Three were used to determine four constructs relating to teachers' self perceptions and their reactions to the changes taking place in the work environment (*dissatisfied*—where the teacher becomes disengaged with the teacher role, *confident*—where the teacher remains optimistic with the teaching role, *seeks external support*—where the teacher feels he/she is supported and is able to link with external groups, parents and community or *seeks internal support*—where the teacher feels support from and is able to link with internal groups of teachers, general staff and administration). Level of agreement with each statement was indicated using a 6 point Likert scale (1 = Very Strongly Disagree and 6 = Very Strongly Agree).

Results

Teachers' reactions to change

Dealing with change

It is interesting to note that even though teachers were feeling the pressure of continual change taking place in their professional environment, most perceived that they were able to still function well (75%) as they *managed* change within their work environment (see Table 2). There was, however, a significant *emotional* toll for many of the teachers, with 35% of respondents giving a negative response to the *coping* statement. The teachers also appeared to see the *future* in a more positive light than the present. They rated the ability to face their professional role in the *future* (83%) higher than their ability to *manage* at the present time.

> ***"Even though teachers were feeling the pressure of continual change, most perceived that they were able to still function well"***

Impact of types of change

Primary teachers indicated their perception of the impact of change in three domains. These included *the rapid rate of change in relation to school curriculum*, 85.5% of respondents indicated that they felt pressured by this challenge, while 85.8%

> ***Teachers rated the ability to face their professional role in the future higher than their ability to manage at the present time***

of respondents reported that *the increase in parent expectations* was perceived to be a challenge. Further, at a slightly lower level, 82.2% of respondents reported *an increase in societal expectations* as being a challenge.

An initial exploration using regression analysis was undertaken to investigate the potential relationships between primary teachers' perceptions of the impact of change in these three domains (rapid rate of change in curriculum, expectations of parents and expectations of society) and their ability to deal successfully with the impact of change in their professional working environments in terms of their ability to manage, cope, and adopt a positive view of future change. Of the three domains, the *Increase in Parent Expectations* was the only significant predictor ($p < 0.05$) of both the teachers' ability to manage and to cope with change. That is, as the teachers' perceptions of parent expectations, in terms of outcomes for their children increased, teachers' ability to manage and cope with change also increased. There was no significant relationship between any of the change domains and the teachers' willingness to positively view change in the future.

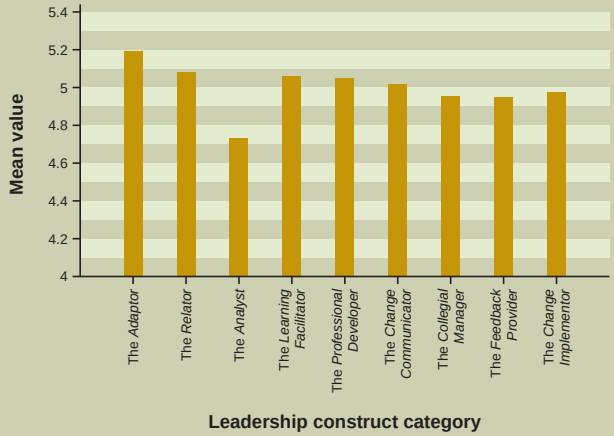
Leadership and change

Leadership constructs: A teacher's perspective

The primary teachers rated their respective school leaders using nine leadership characteristic constructs (See Figure 1). The extent to which a school leader was seen by the teachers as exhibiting the various leadership constructs was measured on a 1 to 6 scale where 1 indicated that the school leader did not exhibit this leadership orientation and 6 indicated that they exhibited this leadership orientation to a significant extent. A mean rating of 3.5 or above, then, indicates that the school leaders were seen by the teachers as exhibiting this leadership construct to some extent.

Teachers perceived that the leaders were quite effective across all the leadership characteristics measured (all means > 3.5). The *Adaptor* construct rating, where the leader is able to demonstrate a changing leadership style, however, was statistically significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) than all other construct ratings, further the *Analyst* construct rating, where the leader is able to deal proficiently with a significant volume of data and evaluate context, was statistically significantly ($p < 0.05$) lower than the others.

Figure 1: School leader's leadership construct: The teachers' perspective



Leadership constructs that promote effective change implementation

The potential relationships between primary teachers' perceptions of a school leader's leadership characteristics and the ability of the leader to carry through, with the help of his/her staff, a change agenda was considered. To do this, exploratory regression analysis was carried out ($n = 282$) using the *Leader as a Change Implementer* construct as the dependent variable and the remaining eight leadership characteristic measures (of the principals) as the predictor variables.

This data explains 13% of the variance in the ability of the leader to deal with change successfully (see Table 3). It suggests that the most effective characteristic, as perceived by the teachers, to deal successfully with the impact of change was for the principal to be a *Relator* ($\beta = 0.29$). This leader relates well to and empathises with staff; is accessible and approachable, has a pleasing personality, effectively negotiates and resolves conflict and most importantly is open and honest.

This data also suggests that in addition to the *Relator* attributes, the *Collegial Manager* ($\beta = 0.14$) construct contributed to teachers being able to deal successfully with the impact of change. The *Collegial Manager* has a participative and inclusive management style with qualities including involving others in decision making, passing on relevant information to staff, being an active and skilful listener, and empowering others.

The negative Beta for the construct, the *Adaptor* ($\beta = -0.14$), where the leader is able to demonstrate a changing leadership style, indicates that the more the teachers perceived the leader displaying the characteristics of the *Adaptor*, the less effective the leader was as the *Change Implementer*.

This study found that leaders displaying the *Relator* and the *Collegial Manager* attributes were more effective in implementing change. This further enhances what is suggested in the literature, particularly regarding the captain–coach leadership model where the leader relates well and is open and honest with his/her staff, thus facilitating a collegial atmosphere.

Leadership constructs that support teachers dealing with change

An exploratory regression analysis was carried out to investigate the potential relationships between a school leader's leadership characteristics (as perceived by the teachers) and the ability of teachers to deal successfully with the impact of change in their professional work environments. The leader as a *Relator* predicted both *managing* change ($\beta = 0.20$), and *coping* with change ($\beta = 0.27$) while the leader as *Collegial Manager* only predicted being *willing* to deal with *future* change ($\beta = 0.17$). Further, the leader as a *Change Communicator* construct was significantly negatively linked ($p < 0.05$), with teachers *coping* ($\beta = -0.18$) and the leader as *Feedback Provider* construct was significantly negatively linked ($p < 0.05$), with teachers being willing to deal with change in the *future* ($\beta = -0.12$).

Discussion

Teachers dealing with change

In terms of teachers' perceptions of the areas of change, the data indicated that only one of the three areas of change studied had a significant impact on the teachers' perceived ability to deal with the challenges associated with change: an increase in parent expectations. An increase in parent expectations impacted positively on the teachers' ability to both *manage* change in a *functional* sense and *cope* with change in an *emotional* sense but had no impact on being *willing* to deal with change in the *future*. This is somewhat paradoxical. One would initially expect that as the pressure from parental expectations increases, ability to manage would decrease. However, it appears that this pressure most often results in the teachers rising to meet such expectations. Coping in an emotional sense if expectations are met suggests there may be intrinsic and extrinsic affirmations for the teacher. However, there is probably a limit to this effect, one would suspect extremely high expectations may be interpreted as unrealistic expectations and this may have negative consequences in terms of teachers dealing with change.

Leadership characteristics: Dealing with change

Effective change implementer

The results suggest that if the leader is to be a successful *Change Implementer* then he/she must relate well to staff and be open and honest (*Relator*), be inclusive in their management style (*Collegial*), and consistent in their approach to leadership (*Adaptor*). The data shows that the teachers felt that leaders who often changed their leadership approach impeded the change process.

Effective teacher supporter

The data indicated that only four of the nine leadership characteristics had a significant impact on the teachers' ability to deal successfully with the challenges associated with change. These four characteristics were: the *Relator*, the *Change Communicator*, the *Collegial Manager*, and the *Feedback Provider*. As indicated in Figure 2, these characteristics impacted the teachers' ability to deal with the challenges associated with change in at least one of the following three areas: *managing* change in a *functional* sense, *coping* with change in an *emotional* sense or being *willing* to deal with change in the *future*.

The School Leader's Leadership Characteristics Model (Figure 2) highlights the point that a school leader displaying the *Relator* characteristics had a significant positive association with both teachers' ability to *manage* change in a *functional* sense and *cope* with change in an *emotional* sense. Leaders displaying the *Relator* characteristics (relating well and being open and honest with teachers) appear to facilitate teachers to function well in spite of significant change, having the largest influence on teachers' change adaptations ($\beta = 0.27$ for coping; $\beta = 0.20$, for managing), most strongly impacting the personal emotional response. Administrators wishing to develop positive teacher responses to change would gain the strongest improvement by enhancing the personal *Relator* attributes of integrity and open relationships. The *Relator* leadership characteristic however, is not associated with teachers' willingness to deal with future change.

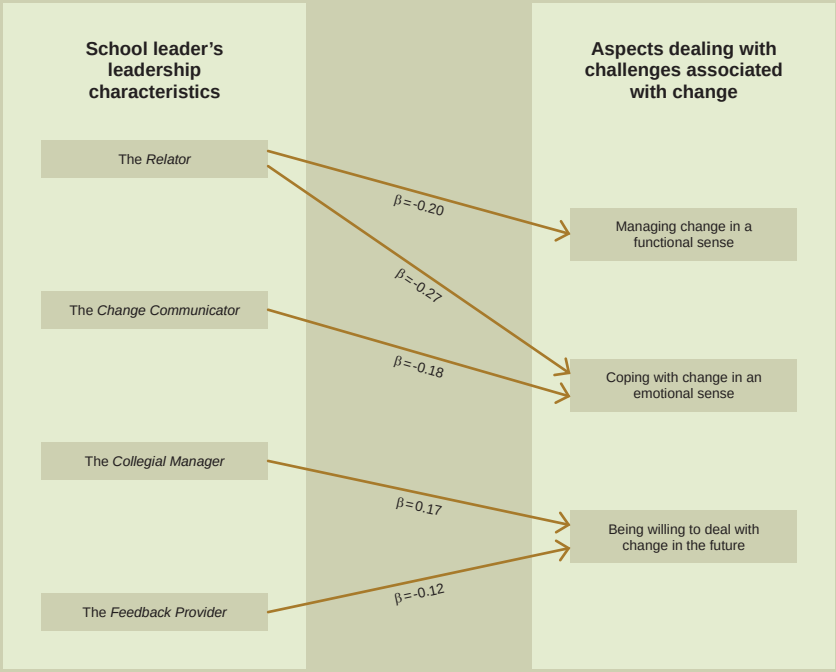
> ***"This study found that leaders displaying the* Relator *and the* Collegial Manager *attributes were more effective in implementing change"***

Table 3: Regression analysis for predictors of the change implementer construct ($R^2 = 0.13$)

Independent variable	Beta	t	Significance
The *Relator*	0.29	3.93	0.00
The *Collegial Manager*	0.14	1.98	0.05
The *Adaptor*	-0.13	-2.06	0.04

Dependent variable: change implementer

Figure 2: School leader's leadership characteristics model: Support for teachers dealing with change



The only significant positive predictor of teachers' *willingness* to deal with change in the *future* is the school leader with *Collegial Manager* characteristics. The *Collegial Manager* leadership characteristic includes a participative and inclusive management style that involves others in decision making, passes on relevant information to staff, listens actively and skilfully, and empowers others. The *Collegial Manager* leadership characteristic however, does not influence the teachers' ability to manage in a *functional* sense or cope in an *emotional* sense.

Finally, in this modelling, both of the leadership characteristics, the *Change Communicator*, and the *Feedback Provider*, are negative predictors of teachers' ability to deal successfully with change, with the *Change Communicator* potentially having a negative impact on *coping* with change in an *emotional* sense and the *Feedback Provider* potentially having a negative impact on being *willing* to deal with change in the *future*. The *Change Communicator*, who continually conveys the need for and importance of change, actually reduces the ability of teachers to cope with change or is closely associated with factors causing lower coping. It appears that teachers might be already sufficiently change aware and find the repetition potentially increases negative emotions, perception of inadequacy, anxiety, fear and despondency. Likewise the *Feedback Provider*, where feedback is given on professional work, is also perceived as a potential deterrent to being *willing* to deal with change in the *future*. Perhaps teachers perceive that by acknowledging feedback, they may be surreptitiously coerced into further involvement with change in the future and be held personally responsible for outcomes, especially negative ones. This is a significant finding considering the increased emphasis on accountability within the current 'economic business' modelling of the educational enterprise.

> ***The* Feedback Provider*, where feedback is given on professional work, is also perceived as a potential deterrent to being* willing *to deal with change in the* future.

Conclusion

This article has examined perceptions of Australian primary teachers employed within the ASA system regarding the aspects and extent of change within the education scene that impacts on their practice. It further explored these teachers' views on how school leaders can best help them deal with the challenges resulting from constant change in their work environments.

The study suggests that leaders need to understand that teachers are experiencing the impact of the rapid rate of change in curriculum, together with higher parent and societal expectations and are dealing with these changes at three 'levels': *functionally*, *emotionally* and with a positive view of the *future*. In addition, leaders need to utilise different leadership constructs to address responses at these three 'levels'.

The descriptive statistics of this study of change in ASA schools across Australia demonstrated that leaders are quite effectively implementing leadership characteristics and 13% of the variation in the successful implementation of change can be explained by three of these characteristics, *Relator* and *Collegial Manager* being positively related and *Adaptor* negatively.

To help teachers deal successfully with change in the *functional* sense and the *emotional* sense, the study indicates that the leader needs to improve the *Relator* characteristic. However, the *Change Communicator* characteristic needs to be minimised as it reduces the ability of teachers to cope with change in an *emotional* sense.

In order to increase teachers' *willingness* to positively view change in the *future* sense, the leader needs to enhance their use of the *Collegial Manager* characteristic. However, the *Feedback Provider* is associated with deterring *willingness* to positively view change in the *future*.

This research identifies perceptions made by participants in an education system in which limited research into change has occurred. It claims that leaders in the ASA system have rated quite effectively on the leadership characteristics constructs, and identified which of these leadership constructs are associated with specific teachers' ability to deal with change in these primary schools. TEACH

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