TEACH[R]

Surviving the first year

What helps principals last the distance?

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Abstract

This research study investigated the induction experiences and perceptions of a group of novice principals in a national, Christian, independent school system. Semi-structured interviews were used to generate discussion, elicit experiences and present recommendations about providing support for novice principals. The study found that eight of the nine principals experienced difficulties with role clarification, administration issues, financial management, time management and the isolation in the principal's position. Initial shock in the role, policy development, lack of leadership training, staff relationships and information overload were also serious issues for the group. From both the literature and the interviewees' perceptions and comments, recommendations for systemic improvements are made regarding the needs of newly appointed principals.

> *Eight of the nine principals experienced difficulties with role clarification, admin issues, time and financial management, and isolation*

Introduction

The role of the principal

The role of the school principal involves the leadership and management of a school community, a role which is constantly increasing in complexity. In the context of the novice principalship, schools have been described as complex, high-pressure, difficult to master and intolerant of beginner's mistakes (Lashway, 2003). Lane (2000, p. 99) described modern, western principalship within the context of its society:

> Principals have a mandate to improve student achievement, maintain a safe campus and keep pace with a constantly changing environment against a backdrop of violence in schools, technological revolution and increasing workloads.

The first year or so can be the most difficult time for a novice principal who lacks experience and is often only just beginning to develop the range of skills that are necessary to manage such an enterprise (Daresh & Male, 2000; Sackney & Walker, 2006). Allison (1997, p. 39) is one of many writers to comment in detail on the difficulties principals face, emphasising the constant pressure of the principalship:

> School principals face very busy and highly unpredictable work days with many individuals and groups competing for their time…many principals are overworked, constantly under fire, and unappreciated…confrontation, conflict, and compromise are constants which principals face on a daily basis...they are becoming increasingly faced with more pressure, more aggression, more change, and more conflict than ever before.

Constantly changing and additional responsibilities such as provisions for students with special needs, risk management, accountability, community involvement and accompanying policy changes together with a correspondingly increased workload, have contributed to the pressures facing school principals (Beeson & Matthews, 1992).

Orientation and induction

Orientation, is here defined as the initial introduction to the position of principal at a particular school. Information about the school in general, its ethos, strengths and challenges as well as particular information about the staff, students and parents are provided. In addition, a wide range of documentation such as academic results, policies, strategic plans etc., would be expected to be shared with a newly appointed principal to assist in their orientation to the position. Orientation is usually managed by local school and School Board personnel.

In contrast, the process of induction, by which the principal undergoes intentional learning experiences to develop the necessary skills of educational leadership and management in situ, occurs over a longer period of time. Further, while induction programs may have local input, there is usually a systemic contribution from within both state and private systems. Induction is particularly important because while devolution of authority continues throughout Australian education systems, the complexity and intensity of the principal's role is increasing, and "more than ever before" is being required of principals (Hewitson, 1996, p. 20). Given the legal accountability this devolution brings with

it, the urgency for immediate competency upon appointment is very apparent.

Purpose of study

Induction of beginning principals in Adventist Schools Australia (ASA) schools had not been previously studied and so this study set out to investigate their experiences and whether these were comparable with those reported in the literature. Previous research studies about novice principals (Dunning, 1996; Daresh & Male, 2000; Aiken, 2001; Bush & Jackson, 2002) have provided suggestions for improving the quality of induction. In this study the participants' own perceptions of their needs and suggestions for induction improvements were also explored in depth. The difficulties they experienced were studied to determine if these could have been avoided with specific induction activities. The data thus gained was used to formulate practical recommendations for improvement in the induction of beginning ASA principals.

Fewer and fewer teachers wish to move into the principalship and worldwide, education systems are finding it increasingly difficult to fill leadership positions (Barnett, O'Mahoney & Miller, 2002; D'Arbon, 2004). The complexity of the role and the lack of support from employing bodies contribute to the situation that Barnett et al., describe as a 'looming crisis'. Did the principals in this study feel a lack of support in their novitiate? An earlier investigation of the experiences of teaching principals in NSW found that within ASA schools, the turnover of principals was higher than for the corresponding state or Catholic groups (Murdoch, 2003). Murdoch also found that little induction was provided for the ASA principals in the specific locality he examined.

Specific issues for beginning principals

In studies of beginning principals from both Australia and overseas, similar difficulties and themes are found again and again. These are very briefly addressed here:

Shock

Daresh and Male (2000, p. 95) described shock as, "The culture shock of the transition" and wrote: "Nothing could prepare the respondents, both American and British, it seems, for the change of perceptions of others or for the intensity of the job."

Administrative and financial issues

Schools today are complex businesses with a high degree of administrative detail and financial responsibility required for their management. A very common difficulty for novice principals in Australia and internationally is learning to handle the core administrative and financial management of a school—hundreds of small pieces of information, routines and processes together with hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Social and professional isolation

Many principals feel quite isolated and anxious in their role as leader of a school, particularly where they may be inexperienced and not have a network of experienced colleagues to whom they can refer for advice in difficult situations. As a result of this major change in their professional lives, many felt "isolated, overwhelmed and disenchanted" with their new position as principal (Aiken, 2001, p.147).

> ***"Many new principals feel quite isolated, anxious and over-whelmed in their role as leader of a school"***

Relationships with staff

Upon appointment to the principalship the change in relationships can be a very difficult adjustment for beginning principals. From the role of colleague, friend and confidant to the role of supervisor and manager for those same peers or teachers at another school, creates a major change in relationships. The cohort of workmates upon whom they once relied for daily support and collegial advice is now gone, and novice principals find they have to establish a network at a new level. This new network is usually outside their own immediate locality, necessitating travel or distance communication. At the same time they have to develop a positive working relationship, albeit at a different level, with their current teaching and ancillary staff. Described by Beeson et al. (1992. p.37) as the "most persistent theme" for the new principals, relationships with staff covered a wide range of aspects of human resource management such as socialising, managing conflict, and balancing supervision and support.

Information overload and insufficient time

Often, in attempts to provide the beginning principal with useful information, these efforts become an additional difficulty because of an information overload and lack of time to address the material properly.

Time management

Not only do principals find they lack time to attend to all the information they need to master instantly, they report that the whole area of time management is a common concern (Daresh & Male, 2000). Many principals have moved from a 'set-timetable' classroom to the principal's office where the day can often be described as "chaotic and fragmented" (Caldwell, 1992, p. 36). Learning to adjust to rapid and unexpected changes, as well as the need to

prioritise and delegate in order to accommodate work is a major shift in thinking and behaviour.

Policy and curriculum reviews and development

Policy and policy development are the frameworks upon which school management operates. Educational policy is more than mere rules; it provides guidelines and safety nets for professionals working in the field of education. Policy review and development, however, may be pushed aside in order to accommodate the insistent demands of day to day operation, as was felt by all of the eight principals studied by Beeson et al. (1992).

> ***"Leadership is the core business of school principals"***

Leadership

Leadership can be described as the core business for school principals, and yet it is sometimes ignored as a topic for study and training in favour of the management aspects of the role (Biggs, 1992; Bowman, 1996).

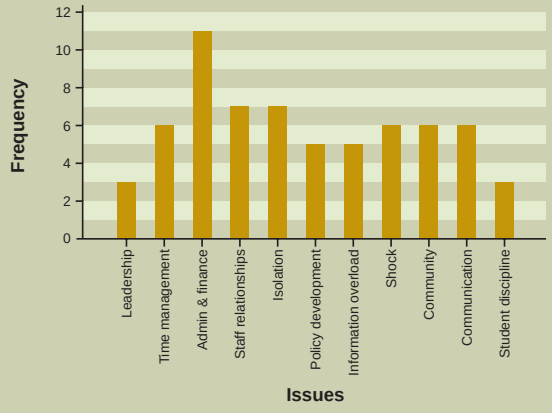
Management aspects of leadership

Dunning's 1996 study of primary principals in Wales, revealed that the sampled principals held generally negative perceptions about the adequacy of the training provided and their preparation for specific management tasks.

School and community issues

The dimension of parent-politics was noted by the majority of principals in the study by Bowman (1996) including the need for conflict resolution, group decision making skills, the development of rapport with parent groups and understanding the norms and expectations of the school community.

Figure 1: Major issues for novice principals in the research literature (13 studies)



Student discipline issues

Principals may find student discipline to be a major concern (Daresh & Male, 2000; Beeson et al. 1992); however, this was not a common experience in the research literature.

Communication

Principals want to spend time meeting with staff but do not want to impose on their busy teachers (Beeson et al., 1992). Beeson's study also reported that many principals made use of printed news and information bulletins to both inform and seek input.

These recurrent, specific issues for beginning principals and how often they were reported in the 13 studies reviewed are illustrated in Figure 1.

Issues associated with induction

Irregularity and inconsistency of induction programs

Induction programs have experienced some specific difficulties. Daresh and Male (2000) noted that some support / induction programs for new principals in Britain were not funded beyond the first year and soon disappeared. Even those programs that were approved through legislation were passed without the provision of sufficient funds, which accords with similar experiences in Australia (Shields, 1997). Inconsistency in induction programs, geographically and over time, was also pointed out by Bowman (1996) as a major concern.

Induction needs within the private education system

Within the private education system, induction programs are a relatively recent development. Fontaine (2001) conducted research into the experiences and perceptions of seven beginning principals in Catholic Schools in Western Australia. The principals considered an induction program was essential; that a formal structured handover between outgoing and incoming principals was needed, and that mentoring and networking programs needed to be in place. Clearly, the needs felt by their state school colleagues are replicated in the private system.

Delivery of induction programs and professional development

Government Education Departments and Independent School Systems have been offering professional development for principals in areas of management and leadership for some time, often in the form of seminars. However, it is doubtful that seminars are the most effective way of delivering these learning experiences, particularly when the learning relates as much to practices and beliefs as to information or facts. The research literature,

according to Robertson (1992), shows that principals want their learning structured in particular ways, not only to meet their knowledge needs, but also to conform to adult learning expectations. Adults need to know why they have to learn something, and they learn more effectively when the material is presented experientially and in a problem solving format. Further, adults appreciate learning material of immediate value and it is important for them to be respected for their prior knowledge (McCabe, Ricciardi & Jamison, 2000).

Understanding the principles of adult learning has caused a shift from the lecture and rote approach used in the past to a focus on the cognitive processes that go on behind overt behaviour. Cognitive perspectives explore the way individuals organise their knowledge (described as schemata) and then how that knowledge is translated into action (Leithwood & Hallinger, 1993). The concept of metaphor has been used to gain further insight into the use of schemata (Dana & Pitts, 1993). For example, the deliberate focus on examining metaphors used by the principal and then purposefully changing them through continuous interaction between the principal and the researcher, to alter the direction of practice, was a successful strategy. If principals see education and the storing of information in the brain as a factory warehouse to be accessed as needed (a common metaphor) they immediately limit their perceptions and view of education. Education is then seen as a passive entity i.e. knowledge, rather than an interactive process. Dana and Pitts (1993) focussed on changing the metaphors used by principals in order to accomplish change in their practice. The authors go on to say that many of these workplace metaphors have become so ingrained in professionals' thinking that they have, as it were, become invisible and, therefore, professionals are unaware of the need to change their thinking.

The benefits of an interactive learning experience between a novice principal and an experienced person (researcher or veteran principal) were mentioned by Barth (1990, p. 68). He noted that difficult times, which he described as being 'in hot water', actually provided an excellent opportunity for personal and professional growth for the principal, providing that there was helpful, non-judgmental assistance and guidance through the process of reflecting on and improving professional practice.

The concept of reflective thinking, particularly where this is mediated, facilitated or guided by a third party who has appropriate expertise, may be one of the most useful ways of developing the covert thought processes mentioned by Leithwood and Hallinger (1993), and thereby addressing the daily problems which principals have to manage. Several research studies have reported that beginning principals have found reflective thinking, and discussion of issues with colleagues to be particularly helpful for broadening and sharpening their thinking about professional practice (Robertson, 1992; Daresh & Playko, 1994; Ginty, 1995; Bowman, 1996). It is not surprising therefore, that mentoring is becoming an increasingly important ingredient of induction programs (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006; Hall, 2008).

Hart's 1993 study used problem solving and reflection, which required the learner to "constantly and consciously draw links among formal knowledge, recommended actions and predicted outcomes" (Hart, 1993, p. 341) thus providing a bridge from theory to practice.

Comparing apparent contradictions in research by Male (2001), which reported on the benefits of deputy principalships and internships and Hart (1993) which proposed a more theory-focused approach, it would appear that the experience of an internship, acting or deputy position, gives beginning principals a sense of familiarity with the routines of administration and therefore less shock when actually faced with the role. However, this does not necessarily mean that their professional practice would be at the level that it might attain if experiences were coupled with reflective thinking and problem solving based on current theory.

Another approach that has proven effective in assisting principals to reflect and to integrate theory and practice is that of cohort grouping (McCabe et al., 2000). Often university course linked, this grouping provides support and encouragement for the participants, leads to improved participation, creates academic performance opportunities for group and individual reflection and discussion, and facilitates social bonding that continues beyond the particular project or program (McCabe et al., 2000). Cohort grouping developed with a new group of principals has the potential for both professional development as well as personal support.

An important conclusion from the consideration of cognitive perspectives in relation to the provision of induction programs/activities for novice principals is the need to provide time and opportunity, even challenge, to engage in reflection, practice and further reflection to achieve improved outcomes in professional practice. It is essential that professional development for the newly appointed principal include a practical application of theory, time to reflect and an appropriate person (i.e. a colleague or researcher) with whom to reflect.

> ***"Interactive learning experiences between a novice principal and an experienced person provide an excellent opportunity for personal and professional growth."***

Method

The subjects included nine principals who were in the second, third or fourth year of their principalship in ASA schools (Primary and K-12) throughout Australia.

A semi-structured interview approach was used because it would permit a number of different issues to be addressed. The advantage of the semi-structured interview is that while the interviewer is leading the process of obtaining information from the interviewee, there is sufficient freedom in the approach to permit the interviewer to probe and expand the interviewee's responses as well as to follow leads as they emerge (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989).

Data collection was by face to face and telephone semi-structured interviews based on a series of questions which had been mailed to participants prior to the interview. A finding of the 1992 study by Biggs was that supervisors tended to 'serve-up' induction programs, but not 'ask the inductees' what they felt they needed most. To address this gap, the questions in this study were designed to elicit the principals' own perceptions of what an induction program should contain, their reactions to frequently used professional development strategies and modes of delivery, the strategies and activities they had found helpful or ineffective, and their overall conclusions regarding ideal induction programs for principals in the future.

Principals' comments

Actual comments by the principals were very revealing:

Shock: *"And so that was a huge shock to me quite honestly." "not knowing the ropes and so on...it's a very daunting task." "I knew there was a lot of work, and I knew it would be a lot of hours, but I had no idea of the number of things that you would be asked."*

Role Clarification: *"I had no idea...Basically I just blundered on from one thing to the next, asking questions as I went...if I'd had some sort of plan to follow." "A lot of it I just had no idea what I was supposed to do...I would have appreciated some sort of a manual. A principal's handbook that told me how I should proceed."*

Policy: *"If I could tap into a resource that said here is a list of policies, adapt them for your circumstances." "I've spent so much of my last two years writing policy. It's taken up a lot of time I'd rather have spent doing other things."*

Financial: *"Where do I get my funding, how do I get it, how do I access it, and who do I contact?" "The biggest stress I have, the thing that keeps me awake the most at nights at the moment, is the financial side of things."*

Isolation: The social issues of isolation, loneliness and relationship changes were stronger for the primary principals, than for the secondary principals, which may reflect a difference in the cultures of the two sectors as well as the fact that the primary schools were situated in more rural and distant locations. One principal, in charge of a small primary school in a location distant from the Education Director and Education Office was unable to attend regular school administrator's meetings conducted in the capital city of the state. To do so would have necessitated a day driving to and from the meetings, meaning at least three days' relief teaching costs, or a $400 return flight plus one day's relief costs. Either option, on a monthly basis, was beyond the financial capacity of this small school, thus the principal remained largely physically isolated from system colleagues.

"But the job of the principal is very lonely. It can be a very lonely job because you go through days where you don't sit down at all, you don't find time to sit down, even have your lunch some times. No one's aware of that. No one picks that up during the day."

Relationships: *"I found relationships to be one of the most difficult things of being a principal… that I was no longer part of the group…and you suddenly realise you're different from your staff."*

Time: *"Basically, if you want to get work done, you just stay late." "The amount of work I had to do, the amount of work that's expected from an Adventist principal just knocked me for six. I mean, it's bringing work home every night until 10:30."*

Leadership: *"The most important thing I did was the Master's leadership degree at Avondale with law, accounting, HRM, change, culture etc. I think there should be further studies taken by principals."*

The questions were deliberately kept at a fairly general level in order to have the subjects suggest their own ideas. Response, interest and empathy were demonstrated by the interviewer; however, there was a conscious attempt not to lead the questioning but to see whether the interviewees produced information similar to that recorded in the research literature and to each other. Hence, while some interviewees did not mention a particular aspect that is found in the literature, or which was mentioned by a colleague, it cannot be concluded that this experience did not occur for this particular interviewee, but rather that it did not leave such a strong, lasting impression within the interviewee's recollections and beliefs that they felt impelled to mention it in the interview. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed.

Results

The transcriptions were examined for similarities and emerging themes. The emerging themes were then compared with findings in the literature and additional issues that the principals in this cohort considered important were noted. Ten common themes emerged from the data, representing issues of concern to the beginning principals in the current study, these are shown in Figure 2. Time management, administration and finance and role clarification were the three highest ranking of the 10 key issues for the novice principals in the current study, with nine out of a possible nine responses.

Figure 3 demonstrates the similarities between the principals in regard to the common issues they experienced.

Clearly, there was great similarity in the perception of important issues between the principals themselves, except for Principal 5, who had moved into the principalship from a previous role in government administration and had received leadership training.

From Figure 3 it is clear that all of the nine principals (100 per cent) commented on issues associated with role clarification, difficulties with administration issues, financial management, and time management. Most principals (eight, or 89 per cent) commented on the isolation they felt in the principal's position. Seven or 78 per cent, talked about the shock they experienced on initial appointment; the need for, and the time spent, on policy development; and the lack of leadership training. Six principals or 67 per cent, regarded issues with changed staff relationships as a serious concern for them. Five of the principals or 56 per cent, spoke of the problem of information overload with all of the material they were trying to master and four, or 45 per cent mentioned insufficient time

Figure 2: Issues for ASA novice principals

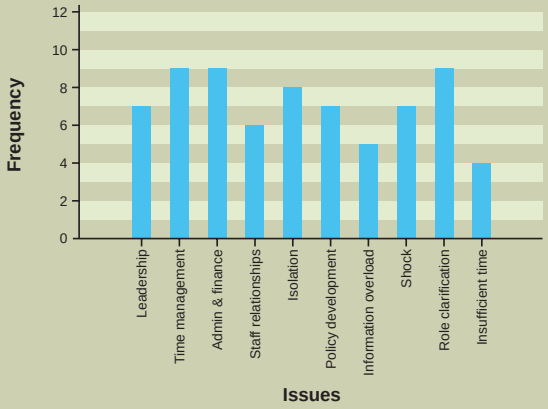
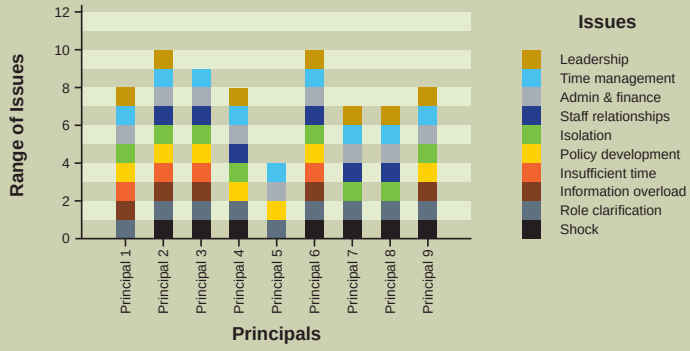


Figure 3: Comparison of induction issues for interviewees in this study



to attend professional development and training, including sessions with a mentor. It must be noted that these comments were made spontaneously and not as a result of specific questioning or probing by the interviewer.

> *The majority of principals did not receive a formal induction*

The majority of principals in this study did not receive a formal induction program during the first year of their principalship. Two had been able to participate in the recently established, two-day 'New Principals' Conference', which they greatly appreciated, but they expressed a desire for more interaction with participants both during the conference and again, later in their first year. When commenting on professional development they had experienced in their first year, a minority expressed frustration that they had not had much input into decisions regarding professional development activities, including the

> *The novice principals wanted more interaction during the conference program as well as ongoing support for networking*

New Principals' Conference, nor had they been surveyed to find out their perceived strengths and weaknesses, or their perceived professional development needs.

On the other hand, most of the novice principals spoke very positively about the support they had received from their local Education Director in the field and it was clear from these comments that the Education Director had become a defacto mentor for some.

Communication difficulties and community difficulties were, according to the literature, significant issues for novice principals; however, the latter was not mentioned by the interviewees in the present study and the former, only barely. A possible explanation is that the principals in this study were all Seventh-day Adventist church members themselves, in charge of Seventh-day Adventist schools with a proportion of the student population (although not all) also Seventh-day Adventists. This means that they would be likely to interact with the church/school community and see each other regularly at church services and social activities on weekends, in fact, they may have known each other for some years, fellowshipping and joining in church programs together. This does not mean that they would not have disagreements and misunderstandings from time to time; however, it is likely there would be a much closer relationship between the principal and the parents than might be found in a state school.

By contrast, the principals in the literature review did not have issues with role clarification or insufficient time to attend professional development programs, as mentioned by the novice principals in the current study. A possible explanation for this is that state education departments have addressed policy, calendars of returns, expectations of the principal, generic bureaucratic requirements, and mandated professional development programs for a far longer period of time than has been the case in ASA schools. ASA schools have been, in the main, fewer and smaller than state schools (in 2008 there are 51 ASA schools in Australia) and the corresponding educational bureaucracy, and policy making have not developed to the same extent.

Conclusions and recommendations

The comments made by all principals in this study were extremely helpful in identifying strengths and weaknesses in the current support mechanisms available to ASA novice principals. With regard to their beginning experiences and induction, the principals in this study believed that while most of them had not received a formal induction program, the recent innovation of a New Principals' Conference was most valuable and should be continued and expanded to address the main issues that caused difficulty. These issues included very specific training in budget management, time management and role clarification. The novice principals wanted more interaction during the conference program as well as ongoing support for networking, possibly through cohort grouping. A formal link to a mentor (possibly more than one, within and outside ASA) was also perceived as a valuable professional development option. These principals placed great value on the regular principals' meetings held in their state on a monthly or quarterly basis, although those who were geographically isolated regretted their inability to participate. None of the principals had been formally linked with a mentor, which they would have appreciated, however, they did speak highly of their local ASA Education Directors and appreciated the support they had provided.

Today's principals need to 'hit the ground running'; preparation programs, appointment of mentors and facilitated induction programs are critically essential for their survival, enjoyment of the role and excellence in outcomes for all members of the school community.

Recommendations regarding the induction of principals in Adventist Schools Australia

1. That newly appointed principals undergo a mandatory orientation program which includes time spent at the school meeting staff, students and significant school community members before actually commencing the appointment,
2. That novice appointees are provided with a complete, formal handover from the previous principal with mandated, detailed information on the school calendar, procedures and practices, sources of information, finances and personnel,
3. That novice appointees are linked to mentors as soon as possible, both within the ASA system and beyond, if possible. On-line support through the local conference education director working with the national education office is needed. Further, that time and costs for meeting with mentors are budgeted,
4. That the local Education Director facilitate visits for the novice principal to comparable schools,
5. That novice principals are encouraged to use the ASA website and its resources, and further, that these be broadened to include proformas for recurring school administrative tasks,

6. That regular monthly administrators' meetings include a teleconference section so as to cater for those unable to attend because of geographic isolation; alternatively, provision of a financial subsidy to enable attendance,
7. That the current two-day conference for new appointees (held in term 1) include a pre-conference survey to determine levels of knowledge and expertise and that the conference be extended to provide an opportunity for a further two-day professional development towards the end of term 3,
8. That most presentations at the New Principals' Conference and at other P.D. events be offered in a workshop mode to encourage reflection and networking. Further, that these events always include a feedback and evaluation procedure,
9. That the current New Principals' Conference include a health and stress management component, and a workshop on the relational aspects of the principalship, the changes that are likely to occur and the best ways of managing these,
10. That from the New Principals' Conference, a formalised network between each particular cohort of novice principals be generated,
11. That ongoing professional development be provided or facilitated at a local level by ASA Education Directors (e.g. through the Independent Schools Association) in the area of leadership and related skills; and that this be delivered through a workshop format incorporating seminar, discussion, reflection and group problem solving,
12. That serious consideration be given to developing a Principals' Handbook in an easy to read, handy reference style. TEACH[R]

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