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Navigating educational change: A teachers' voyage

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Key words: Change, principals, teachers, coping

Introduction

Much time is now consumed not with teaching, but with dealing with the increased paperwork required by government and school administration. (Primary School Teacher)

Like Department of Education and Communities (DEC) schools, Adventist Schools Australia (ASA) are also facing the pressures of external, societal and internal organisational change, largely due to increased accountability.

By gaining an understanding from the teachers' perspective, one is more likely to be able to help teachers to adjust and deal successfully with the impact of these changes. The following study focused on primary teachers in the system of Adventist Schools Australia (ASA). In order to support teachers working in a significant change environment, it is helpful to understand why there is a difference between those teachers who are dealing successfully with the challenges associated with change in ASA Schools, and those who are not.

Methodology

The research design of this study incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methodologies and was conducted in two stages.

In the first stage of the study, an empirical survey, was constructed by the researcher. This instrument was developed after an extensive review of the literature relating to the topic and the theoretical framework of the study. It was found that there were no previously-designed instruments specifically for this area of research: teachers' perceptions of factors that help them deal successfully with the challenges associated with change. Therefore, it was necessary to develop a purpose-designed survey.

From the literature, a series of statements defining a leader's actions that were considered helpful in enabling teachers to deal successfully with the impact of change in their professional environment, was generated. The researcher then instigated consultant

groups among practising teachers and administrators to gauge the concerns and issues relating to the connection between their leader's characteristics and teachers' ability to deal successfully with the challenges associated with change. The aim of these teacher and administration 'think tanks' was to evaluate and extend the survey statements generated from the literature in an attempt to answer the stated research questions. These individual statements were then grouped as leader characteristic constructs using a Delphi approach involving Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) academics and professional educators.

The pilot study was conducted in 11 SDA schools across New Zealand in order that the Australian sample size would not be reduced. Using the feedback from this pilot study, the survey instrument was further refined before the final empirical survey was conducted.

All primary schools within ASA were contacted and invited to take part in the empirical survey. As a result of this contact, 48 of the 51 schools returned 282 usable surveys; the response rate was 66 percent. This empirical data was analysed by using the Statistical Packages, Service and Solutions (SPSS) software package.

In addition, a semi-structured interview schedule was developed and refined for the second stage of the study. All survey respondents were invited to indicate their willingness to be involved in a follow-up interview. In this second stage 28 interviews were conducted, using the semi-structured interview schedule developed and refined for the purpose.

The results from the analysis of the two stages were then considered and compared. The purpose of this triangulation design was to obtain complementary qualitative and quantitative data on the same topic, bringing together the strengths of the two approaches.

Summary of the research findings

The analysis of the data gathered from this mixed methodology allowed the development of multiple inferences that supplemented or complemented each other and also provided opportunities for

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further development, initiation and expansion. This is evident in the responses to the three research questions:

- *What are the challenges that primary teachers in Australian ASA schools perceive that they are facing as a result of changes in their professional working environments?*

Results from the quantitative data analyses focused on the origin of challenges and demonstrated that the majority of teachers perceived that there were considerable increases in expectations of their teaching role from parents and society and that there were many challenges arising from the rapid changes taking place in the schools' curriculum.

The qualitative data analyses, on the other hand, provided results that focused on the challenges in an operational sense, and identified the following three major areas of challenge for these teachers: firstly, a shortage of time to do all that the job now required; secondly, the increased likelihood of litigation against teachers as a result of societal changes that impact on the school environment, together with the challenge to keep up with an internal protection process to ensure teachers are safe guarded; and thirdly, the lack of resources to implement the required changes.

This lack was particularly evident in resources required to support the implementation of ongoing curriculum change. Teachers reported a feeling of being left with little or no support. This was also the case when it came to resources needed to assist with increased workload and other aspects of their role, including behaviour management and people-related issues arising from changes in their professional working environments.

While the literature and the data of this study were in agreement that teachers experienced a shortage of time, there was variation in how the shortage of time limited them.

The literature states that scarcity of time makes it difficult for teachers to plan more thoroughly, to commit themselves to the effort of innovation, to get together with colleagues, or just to reflect on their own. This lack of time is a vital issue for matters of change, improvement and professional development (Hargreaves, 2004, p. 15). The data from this study, however, indicate that teachers experienced a shortage of time just to do all that their role entailed.

A further difference between this study and other studies reviewed was in regard to litigation. Teachers in this study perceived there was not only a need

to alter their day-to-day processes to reduce the likelihood of litigation, but that they lacked knowledge of litigation processes and implications.

Changing parent and societal expectations, and rapid changes in the curriculum were evident in the quantitative study, and reinforced by the qualitative data analyses. The time, litigation and resource issues from the qualitative data analyses were highlighted as the most prominent challenges that teachers perceived that they faced. Primary teachers in ASA schools were reflecting other Australian primary teachers' conclusions (Beare, 1995).

In summary, the challenges, in an operational sense, highlighted by this group of ASA primary teachers in general terms, follow that which has been identified in other Australian-based studies: time shortage, potential litigation and resourcing issues (NSW Department of Education, 2007).

- *To what extent do the primary teachers in Australian SDA schools perceive that they are dealing successfully with the challenges resulting from change in their professional roles?*

This question was specifically addressed in the quantitative stage of the study and the inferences from the qualitative data supported the quantitative data. Results from the quantitative data analyses indicated that the responses to this research question were multi-faceted depending on which aspect of change was being considered: dealing with change in a *functional sense*, dealing with change in an *emotional sense* and attitudes towards potential *future change*

The teachers perceived that they would in most instances be able to deal with potential *future change*, registering overall a rating of 5.05 on a 1 to 6 scale. Even though they were not quite as positive about their ability to *manage* change in a *functional sense*, that is, still able to fulfil their assigned roles (4.82), more than 70% of them indicated they were *managing* change well or very well. The teachers, however, were not so certain that they were *coping* successfully with change in an *emotional sense* (3.98), and approximately one-third of them indicated they were struggling to *cope* successfully.

Many of the interview responses portrayed teachers were experiencing *emotional* reactions to the challenges of the change that they face. Most of the teachers expressed this challenge in terms of a negative emotional response. Even though there were challenges due to change, in most cases the comments reflected that they were still able to *function* in their roles.

“**Teachers were not certain that they were coping successfully with change in an emotional sense—approximately one-third of them indicated they were struggling to cope successfully**”

For each aspect of change—*managing, coping* and potential to deal with change in the *future*—the data was analysed against the respective demographic factors, (gender, age, experience, qualifications, position, classroom structure and employing regional conference). It found there was no significant difference in terms of *managing* change in a *functional sense* or attitude to potential *future* change between the various sub-groups based on each of the demographic factors. In contrast, there were significant differences in a number of demographics in the teachers' perception of their ability to *cope* with change in an *emotional sense*.

The trend in emotional coping capacity indicated the 20–29 year age group had a high *coping* rating (4.56 on a 1 to 6 scale) with a category reduction in the rating for the 30–39 years age group (4.08); this continued to decrease with ageing until the over 60 years age group, where there was a considerable increase (5.14). These facts could be due to novice teachers being confident and optimistic about their new roles, believing they had been prepared to tackle and overcome any obstacles or challenges of the future. Perhaps they were still naive to all that the job entailed. Beyond 30 it seemed there was a clearer understanding of all teacher's role entailed, however the over 60 years age group, approaching retirement, were confident in their experience and this may have caused them to feel they could last the distance.

There were also trends related to years of experience and qualifications. Those with very little experience had a high *coping* rating (4.54), that reduced for subsequent years of experience (3.88 to 4.45) but showed a slight increase as the teachers' experience ultimately grew, paralleling the age related results. Those with a Masters degree scored higher on their ability to *cope* compared to other levels of qualification, the degree, diploma or certificate.

In summary, the teachers in the study were relatively confident that they would be able to deal with potential *future* change. Further, even though they were feeling the pressure of change in their professional working environments, most perceived they were still able to successfully complete all their required duties, though this may mean taking considerable work home. There was, however, an emotional cost to this successful functioning, with one-third of the teachers describing the cost as being considerable.

Even though the literature did not distinguish between the different aspects of dealing with change as identified in this study, it did highlight the reality of teachers facing greater stress than ever before

(NSW Department of Education, 2007). This seems to parallel the emotional cost of dealing with an ever-changing work environment identified in this study.

- *What is the relationship between the principal's leadership characteristics and the ability of primary teachers in Australian SDA schools to deal successfully with the challenges associated with change as perceived by the primary teachers themselves?*

The quantitative data (Matthes, 2011) showed that it was the leader who displayed both the *Relator* leadership characteristics of relating well and empathising with staff at a personal level, and the *Collegial Manager* leadership characteristics of a participative and inclusive style, that had the greatest impact on teachers' ability to successfully deal with the challenges of change. These people-orientated leadership styles and managerial practices emerged as imperatives in supporting teachers to deal successfully with change.

In the qualitative stage of this study (Matthes, 2012), data was obtained from teacher interviews, and focused around two questions. First, "What are the things that your head teacher is doing to assist you that you consider to be effective in helping you deal successfully with the change you face?", and second, "What more do you think that your head teacher could do to assist you that you consider to be effective in helping you deal successfully with the challenges of change that you face?"

Analysis of data on the first question indicated most teachers interviewed were of the opinion that being personable and respectful—having a *people-focus*—was the essential element in enabling leaders to assist teachers to deal successfully with the challenges associated with change.

Consideration of data related to the second question indicated that teachers were of the opinion that the principal could also assist them by implementing some or all of the following nine identified strategies.

Strategy one: The head teacher to provide enough time to teach. This included avoiding interruptions to the valuable classroom teaching time and being selective in the extra curricular activities and programs that were approved for the school community to be involved in.

Strategy two: The head teacher to minimise duties for the classroom teachers. This included looking for ways to minimise playground

“*People-orientated leadership styles and managerial practices emerged as imperatives in supporting teachers to deal successfully with change*”

supervision and other related duties in order to free up the teacher to complete the necessary paperwork, marking, and meetings with parents and fellow teachers.

Strategy three: The head teacher to maximise encouragement for the classroom teachers. This included the head providing genuine personalised encouragement, praise and reinforcement for a job well done. This was most effective when done face-to-face as opposed to what was often commented upon as being an electronic impersonal approach (email).

Strategy four: The head teacher to give personal attention to the classroom teachers. This included the head taking a personal interest in them by listening and sharing concerns and ideas, and being available.

Strategy five: The head teacher to provide further supervision and support of the classroom teachers. This included the head themselves observing in classrooms to reinforce the good things that were happening, and providing staff development in order to encourage and assist teachers to fully develop the talents and skills that enhance their teaching, and improve student learning.

Strategy six: The head teacher to assist with classroom management. This included assisting with suggestions of suitable classroom approaches and modelling these while taking a class for the teacher where there was a need.

Strategy seven: The head teacher to provide opportunities for teachers' renewal. This included having a mission to keep all staff 'growing' as far as spiritual growth was concerned, occasionally having retreat days held in a quiet setting away from the school.

Strategy eight: The head teacher to oversee first-year teacher inductions. This included providing help with the induction process for beginning teachers.

Strategy nine: The head teacher to provide mentors for classroom teachers. This included taking responsibility for all teachers' professional growth and well-being and enabling each teacher to have a colleague to consult with. This was particularly essential when the teacher moved into a new role.

These nine strategies summarised the responses of all the interviewees, providing valuable insights into their perceptions. It was not always possible to determine from the data the relative importance of these nine strategies; however strategy one, enough time to teach, was the issue that was most regularly referred to and was high on teachers' ranking of need strategies.

Review

The data from this study indicate that primary teachers in the ASA system are impacted by a number of societal and educational changes, and that the action of the school leader is an important factor influencing the teachers' ability to deal with the challenges of change.

Rucinski, Franco, Nocetti, Queirolo, and Daniel (2009) concur with Blasé and Blasé (2004), whose work showed the importance of head teacher support and modelling for teacher reflection. They maintain that the actions and behaviours of school leaders are key factors for understanding teachers' dispositions about teaching and learning within the context of change efforts. Their research showed clearly that, when school leaders change implementation designs, and remove their support of change efforts, one effect may well be to reduce teachers' motivation and to diminish their engagement in and commitment to school change efforts.

McEwan (2003) outlines ten traits of highly effective principals. One of these was the *change master*. As a *change master* the head teacher is a flexible, futuristic and realistic individual who is able to both motivate and manage change in an organised, positive and enduring fashion. Effective leaders advocate, nurture and sustain a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

Hubbard and Samuel (2002) recommended that organisations should start with what they call *captain-coach* leadership. This style of leadership provides *coaches* who are 'with them on the field', building effective relationships and providing a cause to follow. Coaching is about becoming a partner in the team-member's journey toward enhanced competence and effectiveness, while enabling teachers to deal successfully with the challenges associated with change by providing processes that facilitate support to achieve the desired results.

The emphasis on the *people focus*, as a central factor in enabling teachers to deal with change (particularly their ability to *cope* in an *emotional sense*), is also identified in the literature. The literature indicated, and this study supported the concept that staff need to feel and know that they are supported and will be listened to when it comes to their needs. School leaders are heading in the right direction when they make the creation of a supportive school environment a primary goal. Teachers with supportive leaders do not feel the same 'role strains' as those who are not supported, even if their roles are ambiguous (Rodgers 1995, p. 25).

“Staff need to feel and know that they are supported and will be listened to when it comes to their needs.”

Research by Fechner (1997, p. 154) revealed that teachers are more likely to 'go the extra mile' when they feel valued, be it by their immediate school leaders such as heads of school, or by the principal. Authoritative leaders, who place an emphasis on relationships, find ways to use change to the school's advantage (Dinham, 2005, p. 351).

This study relates to the *captain-coach* style of leadership (Hubbard & Samuel, 2002) which relies on trust and a relationship to be built. These are important components in affecting change. This study also acknowledges the importance of a collegial approach where the leadership style is more fluid. The *captain-coach* model is being fairly widely accepted in schools as a model. It is people orientated and effectively initiates and nurtures change taking place. In the *captain-coach* model the individual is very much a part of taking action which leads toward the desired change. It is an ongoing staff development activity underpinned by the leader's belief in the employee and it helps him/her take responsibility for the change process.

The *task focus* component of this model with its inclusion of teacher involvement in decision making, systematic and open processes, and providing teachers with resources, is supported by the literature. The literature suggested that the involvement of teachers in educational change is vital to its success, especially if the change is complex and is to affect many settings over long periods of time. Also, if this involvement is to be meaningful and productive, it means more than teachers acquiring new knowledge of curriculum content or new techniques of teaching (Wideman, 1991, p. 119).

Research suggests that allowing teachers to take part in decision making yields productive results. Employee satisfaction, motivation, morale and self-esteem are affected positively by involvement in decision-making and implementation (Gamage & Pang, 2003).

The study data also parallels the literature in indicating that the growing threats of litigation and the escalating demands of accountability have also created in schools a proliferation of notes of permission and explanation, along with other form filling and paperwork (Rosenholtz, 1989, p. 30). Teachers are feeling the tensions of this increasing phenomenon, and the increased workload it creates.

The research of Meyer, Macmillan and Northfield (2009) suggests that a principal/head teacher who practises consistency, clarity of communication and congruence between word and action with a sensitivity of context, will be more successful in initiating change. Without these practices, teachers

may only pay lip service to the principal/head teacher, and may in fact seek ways to reduce his/her influence. Their research confirms that teacher morale is a critical factor that influences the ability of the new principal to initiate and manage change. They 'found' that teachers who do not feel valued or part of the decision-making process become less committed to work outside their classrooms and tend to focus on the immediate instead of the long-term needs of the school. For this reason, Meyer et al. (2009) suggest that new principals/head teachers need to attend to the development of positive relationships among staff by: "Developing and maintaining a culture of open communication", "Building trust through being consistent between what they say and what they do", "Ensuring transparency in decision making" and "Considering the context when implementing initiatives" (p. 184).

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