

Can leadership help teachers deal with change-associated challenges?

Andrew Matthes

Senior Lecturer, Primary Course Convenor, Faculty of Education and Science, Avondale College of Higher Education, Cooranbong, NSW

Introduction

Life in the modern world is fast, complex, uncertain and compressed. This presents new problems and challenges for school systems and the teachers who work in them (Fullan, 2005). The compression of time and space create accelerated change; evidenced by growing innovation, overload and intensification in teachers' work. It is undeniable that teachers and principals in Australian schools, increasingly, are expected to address an array of social issues and societal problems previously external to their professional domain (Mitchell et al., 2002, p. 19). Furthermore, government safety and welfare concerns have resulted in new legislation and regulations, culminating in additional levels of accountability for educators.

The research study

School leadership research has shown that the role of the principal, in particular, significantly influences the success of school change and improvement (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000; McEwan, 2005). Little formal research has been done within Adventist Schools Australia (ASA) regarding the impact of challenges associated with change on teachers in their professional working environments; given the observed effects of change within this education system.

This article presents further findings from a longer study about leadership and teachers dealing with change (Matthes, 2011). These findings—the results from *qualitative* data analysis—support and complement conclusions based on *quantitative* data—previously published in *Teach Journal of Christian Education*, 5 (2), 34–41. The two research questions below, in the qualitative phase of the study, specifically relate to *primary teachers' perceptions* working in schools operated by ASA:

- What challenges are primary teachers facing as a result of changes in their professional working environment?
- What is the relationship between the principal's leadership characteristics and primary teachers' ability to deal successfully with the challenges associated with change?

Method

The 28 teacher interviewees were a representative sample of primary teachers employed by ASA in terms of gender, age, experience, and geographical location. Twenty-four interviews were completed face-to-face and four over the phone.

Three questions formed the basis of the semi-structured interview schedule, leaving opportunities for further probing of interviewees' initial responses. Interviewees were asked:

1. "What are the most significant areas of challenge you face in your teaching role as a result of changes in your professional working environment?" (relating to the first research question)
2. "What are the things that your principal is doing to assist you that you consider to be effective in helping you deal successfully with the challenges of change that you face?" (relating to the second research question)
3. "What more do you think that your principal could do to assist you that you consider to be effective in helping you deal successfully with the challenges of change that you face?" (relating to the second research question)

Data obtained from the interviews were transcribed; then coded, categorised and inductively analysed. This process included the generating of themes and an exploration of the interaction between them.

Findings and discussion

Major challenges faced

Teachers indicated that they faced two specific, major challenges as a result of the changes in their professional working environments: *Scarcity of time* and *increased likelihood of litigation*. The more generalised challenge related to *under-resourcing* in several areas of school operations.

Scarcity of time

The highest recurring challenge reported by the teachers was the scarcity of time (see Table 1). One teacher expressed it in this way:

“Teachers indicated that they faced two specific major challenges as a result of the changes in their professional working environments: scarcity of time and increased likelihood of litigation”

Scarcity of time makes it difficult to plan more thoroughly, to commit oneself to the effort of innovation, to get together with colleagues, or just to reflect on your own (Teacher 4; abbreviation: T4).

The essence of the above comment was repeated in various forms by many of the teachers. There was “no time for the thinking aspect of teaching and learning” (T5). Typically teachers reported “spending long hours to keep up with the paperwork” (T24) and, “we don’t even have enough time to teach all that the curriculum requires with the increased classroom interruptions” (T12). It was also commonly reported that additional time was required by teachers to make up for the decrease in parent support in the classroom. Nowadays, school is seen as being all about “time management” (T16). One reported, “spending less time with my family” (T20) just to get the required tasks completed.

A very common and somewhat surprising response by interviewees was that they now had insufficient time left in their life to contribute in their local church to the extent that they once did—an apparent stressor for some. Another teacher expressed the “need to say ‘No’ [to tasks] in order to keep afloat” (T3).

For these teachers the scarcity of time was due to the increase—compared with previous years—in teachers’ professional role expectations. Areas perceived as having increased most in workload were: Handling paperwork relating to government requirements, meeting occupational health and safety (OH&S) requirements, reporting academic results, submitting requests for government resources, and preparing for accreditation. Time is now consumed not with teaching but, increasingly with “paperwork required by government and school administration” (T6).

Another cause identified by teachers as an impingement on their time was the increasing difficulty to get parents to be involved in school activities. One teacher reflected:

Parents seem less and less able to spare time themselves, any more, to come in and help with little routines in the classroom or on excursions, I don’t think it’s because they don’t want to, it’s just that in most families both parents are working, leaving little spare time remaining. I am finding it harder and harder each year to keep up the parent involvement in things like changing readers and helping with excursions (T25).

A further area of expressed concern was an increase in the quality of extra-curricular school activities expected of teachers; often in order to market their school in a positive light. As one teacher put it:

Table 1: Change-associated challenges

Responses from interviews	Frequency (n=28)	Percent
Major challenges		
Scarcity of time	24	85.71
Increased likelihood of litigation	23	82.14
Generalised challenge		
Under-resourcing	16	57.14

The Infants school concert is bigger than Ben Hur and the underlying pressure is there by parents and administration to keep improving on it, year after year (T19).

It also seemed, according to another teacher:

Children are needing more time. Teachers are rapidly becoming a significant role model and need to give a greater amount of time to children in extra-curricular activities and behaviour management (T2).

Teachers highlighted the rapid curriculum changes and the ‘flow-on’ effect of having to generate classroom approaches and change assessment procedures and resources. As one teacher observed—and many agreed—there is now a “continual expectation of [new] documentation: Outcomes, behaviour, incidences, et cetera” (T27) every time the curriculum changed or new regulations were introduced; a seemingly frequent occurrence.

Typically, teachers considered that there were greater parental and government expectations, in terms of providing special programs, for talented, gifted and special-needs students and that teachers were taking on responsibilities that were once the role of parents. In the words of one teacher: “Having a pastoral heart is a major part of teaching in a Christian school context” (T10), and this takes time.

Perceptions of taking longer to complete normal classroom tasks and implement classroom management were expressed. This was an outcome of more open enrolment policies, with greater acceptance of students from a range of different cultures, religious backgrounds, academic abilities and behavioural attitudes. Teachers mentioned that increasingly, there were now “changes in student behaviour [with many students] more emotionally affected” (T15). Consequently,

“Another cause identified by teachers as an impingement on their time was the increasing difficulty to get parents to be involved in school activities”

many activities took added time because teachers were “dealing with diverse [student] values [and still had to] maintain a cohesive whole” (T21). Complex behavioural issues thus led to greater time consumption. One teacher mused, “Teachers are replacements for the increasing number of parents who are no longer a part of the student’s family unit” (T3).

Surprisingly, teachers did not identify the devolution of administrative tasks from school leaders to teachers as a source of increased workload that contributed to scarcity of time. Yet analysis of teachers’ description of time-consuming duties identified many of them as previously in the domain of administrators.

Increased likelihood of litigation

The second major area of challenge was the increased likelihood of litigation against teachers. Eighty-two per cent of interviewees identified this as a challenge (Table 1). This finding was unexpected; as all interviewees belonged to a Christian church-based education system where litigation is very infrequent. However, one teacher stated:

I sometimes experience fear that I am like a flammable liquid, waiting to be ignited. I have resorted to not taking children on excursions anymore, in case something happens to a student (T28).

All the teachers knew someone, or they themselves had experienced an ‘encounter’ with the law in relation to a school matter. They indicated that sometimes what they had heard was most likely exaggerated, but the facts were never communicated to them and this may have highlighted the perception of this challenge. Interviewees felt that, generally, employing bodies—both private and public—seemed to desert rather than support teachers involved in law cases; a very disconcerting situation. A teacher’s comment summed up this concern as follows:

At the whim of a parent’s accusation, I was suspended from my duties. I didn’t even know what the accusation was; meanwhile I didn’t have a chance to defend my innocence as the rumour mill ran rife. I felt very vulnerable, with little support and not much information through proper channels (T13).

Teachers saw the need for a “school-wide implementation of change and procedure for [teachers’] protection” (T13). But again, all this takes time. Another teacher stated:

A teacher friend of mine is no longer in the [ASA] system, teaching. His career was cut short, based on an accusation that was never proven. It seems often that we only receive admin support when the ‘chips are up’ (T24).

Several teachers were of the opinion that the internal politics of the system makes it difficult for teachers when they fall ‘out of favour’ with their local communities. One teacher expressed it this way:

Being a teacher in the church system can be great when things are going well. However, if the going gets tough and you fall out of favour with administration or local community politics, [there’s] back stabbing and the need to look over your shoulder can be overwhelming (T17).

Under-resourcing

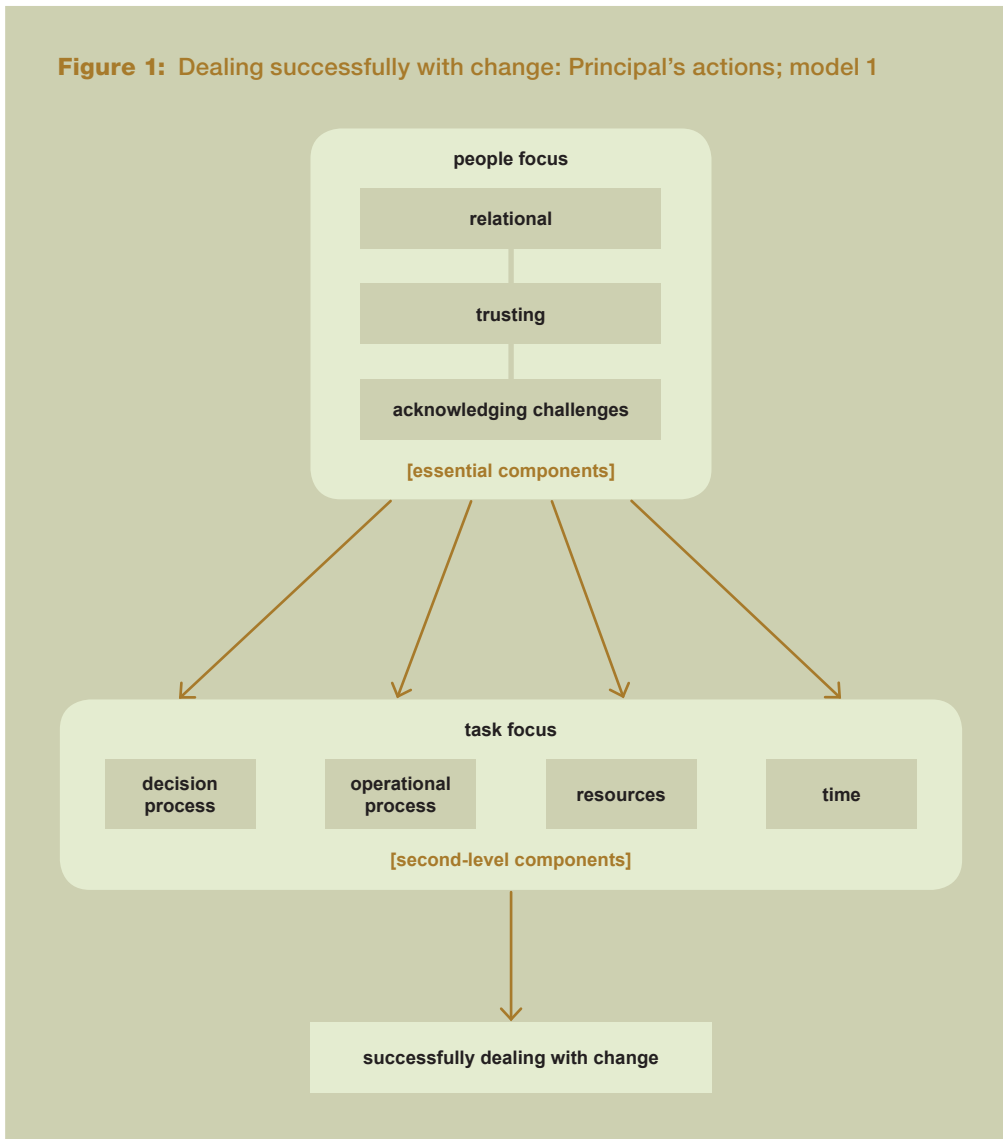
The third major challenge reported by teachers was being under-resourced to carry out their duties. (57.1%; see Table 1). “Under-resourced” interpreted as, not being given opportunities to develop their knowledge, access information, or obtain adequate support, to fulfil specified role tasks. The lack of resources seemed to be in six areas. First, how to transfer curriculum changes into the classroom. Second, how to deal with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Third, what programs to adopt to address students with special needs (e.g. English as a second language, gifted and talented, learning support). Fourth, how to deal with the greater range of student behaviour now encountered. Fifth, they felt that there was also pressure for them to adopt the latest technology, but to them there seemed little willingness for schools to finance and provide time for them to develop in this area. Sixth, there was a perceived need for more training in mentoring and preparing other staff for new roles. Two examples are illustrative of these points:

When there are changes in the curriculum we are often too busy to attend an in-service day; however, it is the very thing that we need. When there are new expectations of us in regard to dealing with KLAS or the way to assess, we need to feel confident that we know what to do (T6).

Technology is changing at such a rapid rate I feel a little left behind in what I know I could be doing if only I knew how (T19).

Some teachers commented on what they thought was a “lack of assistance to provide staff with up-to-date approaches in a constantly changing curriculum” (T27). Despite working in a large school, there were teachers who, nevertheless, reported that there was “no real support from colleagues; and a

The lack of resources seemed to be in six areas

Figure 1: Dealing successfully with change: Principal's actions; model 1

feeling of isolation" (T8). In dealing with curriculum changes, beginning teachers expressed they "would like to be shown what we have to do" (T25). Needing help to, "begin new units of work and acquire new teaching styles to match students' various learning needs" (T2), were also considered areas that required support. "Implementing professional development even though the budget is tight" (T17) and, "inducting new staff" (T11), were thought to be important by many teachers, as well.

It can be seen from the teachers' perspectives that change is presenting them with a number of significant challenges. Next, the article looks at responses to the second research question.

Dealing with change: What principals are doing

A principal's action model

The second research question dealt with the relationship between the principal's leadership characteristics and primary teachers' ability to deal successfully with the challenges associated with change. In exploring this topic, the following interview question was put to teachers: "What are the things that your principal is doing to assist you, that you consider to be effective in helping you deal successfully with the change you face?" The teachers' responses and the associated discussions are presented below.

“Despite working in a large school, there were teachers who, nevertheless, reported that there was ‘no real support from colleagues; and a feeling of isolation’”

Interviewees' responses, when carefully analysed, highlighted that effective principals' actions were not discrete acts, but consisted of a complex interaction of multiple factors. Initially, some responses appeared confusing and even somewhat contradictory. However, teachers generally agreed on school leaders who effectively helped them deal successfully with challenges posed by change. They were identified, primarily, as being people-oriented; displaying appropriate positive attitudes to teachers (*people focus*). They also generated systems in supporting teachers to complete their tasks (*task focus*). Further, teachers' responses indicated that this *people focus* construct was essential if leaders were to be successful in assisting teachers deal with change-associated challenges. Indeed, if the leaders were considered to lack a people focus, the systems they put in place, good as they might be, appeared to have only a minimal impact in supporting teachers.

The interviewees also identified, on a second level, four *task focus* components that assisted teachers in dealing successfully with the challenges associated with change. However, there was no general agreement on the relative importance of these respective tasks. Some interviewees viewed all these tasks as important while others gave different priorities to the four *task focus* components. This may have been influenced somewhat by interviewees' personality, position in the school and/or their desire to have greater involvement in the administrative process within their school.

The interconnections between the various actions that principals need to adopt, if they are to enhance the ability of teachers to deal successfully with the change experienced in their professional environment, are shown in Figure 1.

People focus construct

Analysing teachers' responses indicated that the *people focus* construct consisted of three components:

- relational
- trusting
- acknowledging challenges

First, *people focus* included a *relational* component which described a leader who demonstrated interest in, and indicated the value of his/her staff by the personal qualities used when interacting with them. Interviewees described principals who effectively assisted teachers in dealing with change-associated challenges as, approachable, supportive, giving encouragement, ready to listen and discuss issues, and willing to implement good ideas.

Second, *people focus* included a *trusting* component which described a leader who gave teachers the freedom to be different and unique in their approach to doing their job. Of one leader it was said: "He supports my decision and teaching style" (T20). Another said, "I feel trusted [by leaders]" (T12). This bestowed trust was reciprocated by teachers. Further, it was acknowledged that it was not always possible to be consultative; at times trust had to be exercised:

Change can occur quickly; sometimes you can't always communicate all aspects of the change to everyone's satisfaction. You have to trust admin, when and where you can't always collaborate. Sometimes, we've got to sort out information into what's important, what's really important; and avoid overwhelmingness (T11).

Third, the *people focus* included an *acknowledging challenges* component. This described leadership that was willing to verbalise that change—particularly mandated change—might cause stress, anxiety and pressure and also accepted the doubts expressed by teachers. Another teacher described a 'buffer zone',

where anyone of us can go back to digest and work through implications, for us as individuals. This is in contrast to isolating ourselves from each other and the change requirements (T26).

One teacher observed about her principal: "[He] acknowledged my doubt and worked with me to sort through it" (T15). A comment, echoed by several teachers, was:

The stress and worry that I was feeling from the pressure of things changing, was observed by my principal and she gave me strategies and suggestions to cope which indicated she knew how I was feeling (T5).

In the interview dialogue about how ASA, as an organisation, was dealing with change, stresses were identified by teachers in terms of frustration and doubt. For some, this took the form of doubting the efficacy of some of the change: "Will these changes and this new system work?" (T22). "Is it really necessary?" (T16). "What will my role in the new structure be?" (T27). Others expressed doubts about the ethics and ideology of the change.

These expressed doubts and anxieties appear to be normal in the cycle of change. However, effective leadership is aware of the difficulties associated with change and recognises the stresses that teachers experience.

“Teachers' responses indicated that this *people focus* construct was essential if leaders were to be successful in assisting teachers deal with change-associated challenges”

Task focus construct

Analysing teachers' responses indicated that the *task focus* construct was comprised of four components:

- appropriate decision-making processes;
- appropriate operational processes;
- appropriate resource allocation processes; and
- sufficient time allocations.

First, the *task focus* construct incorporated appropriate *decision-making processes*, where the leader consulted teachers in the decision-making process. The leader provided collegial support, was consultative, collaborative and facilitated a team focus. The leader was seen to join in with team meetings contributing good suggestions. Teachers' comments included:

My principal emphasised, from the outset, collaborative processes in staff meetings to enhance collegial support. Group ownership of the process empowers...I can say, we own things together here at our school (T15).

It was pointed out to the interviewer: "When our leader used the team to work together, we had a purpose and got a lot more done" (T7). One teacher said:

My principal developed more open, face-to-face and consultative communication generally, and more consciously, within a team focus. The team focus enabled staff to share the natural, common pressures and concerns associated with the changes (T22).

Another interviewee noted: "We were blessed; the school was ready for change" (T28). The researcher asked him how he identified this 'blessing' and how the leader harnessed it. His response was:

He met with staff individually and as a group to understand their concerns and needs. He shared his concerns but also what he wanted our vision to be with respect to our core concerns as a school. He endeavoured to have us see that he had to face mandated change from the conference [regional administration], but as a staff we could own it and transform it at the school level so that we could manage the mandate. He developed a more conscious team approach, across the year levels, to enhance the change process and the necessary moral and practical support needed to carry out the changes. Most of all he emphasised, from the outset, collaborative processes at whole staff meetings, and where appropriate, with parents and students. They too are affected by change(s) and need a chance to understand where we're going as a school and why. It was this understanding of the process that empowered the staff (T28).

Staff collaboration was a returning theme; as illustrated by this observation:

After a school-wide review, which, as you know, has included some outside consultancy, we had a strong sense of how we could change this culture, especially with respect to staff welfare. I believe welfare and morale go together; from the way staff conduct meetings to how we support each other in [student] discipline situations. We've come a long way in the last few years (T29).

Further comments mentioned leadership that was open-minded and contributed good suggestions to team meetings; leadership that "respects my calling and passion and gives room for its expression without legalistic constraint and expectation" (T4).

Second, the *task focus* construct included appropriate *operational processes*. The latter were considered appropriate if they were presented or implemented in a systematic and open manner. This included leaders delegating responsibilities without micro-managing delegated tasks, sending clear communication to teachers and adopting a 'small step' approach that saw gradual implementation of change. These leaders had processes in place which emphasised the purpose, meaning and reasons for change. As one teacher commented: "At school we need to have structures and processes in place to work with change" (T12). Another said:

It's difficult at times coping with what 'has to be', or so we're told. It has helped at times to get a chance to talk as a staff about the changes occurring over the whole of society, not just education. Mind you, a 'whinge' is helpful—even though it may not directly solve anything as such (T18).

Other responses mentioned that effective leaders: Linked change imperatives and processes to appropriate delegation of responsibilities, allowed time for a shift in mind-sets and for change implementation and, in particular, did not force imposed change" (T9). Moreover, one interviewee credited his principal with claiming: "[A process of] small steps towards core change is more realistic than grand change forced quickly on paper" (T26).

Third, the *task focus* construct included appropriate *resource allocation processes*. Resource allocation was deemed appropriate if teachers were provided with opportunities for professional development and role fulfillment. Effective principals found practical solutions to challenges faced by teachers, as evident from several comments: "[He/she] offers to teach lessons to provide an example" (T14). The principal "tries to find solutions to lessen the load of paperwork" (T1). Others reported their leader as: "Giving hands-on, relevant

“Appropriate operational processes included leaders delegating responsibilities without micro-managing delegated tasks, sending clear communication to teachers and adopting a 'small step' approach that saw gradual implementation of change”

“For teachers to deal successfully with change, principals needed to address the issues relating to their essential tasks”

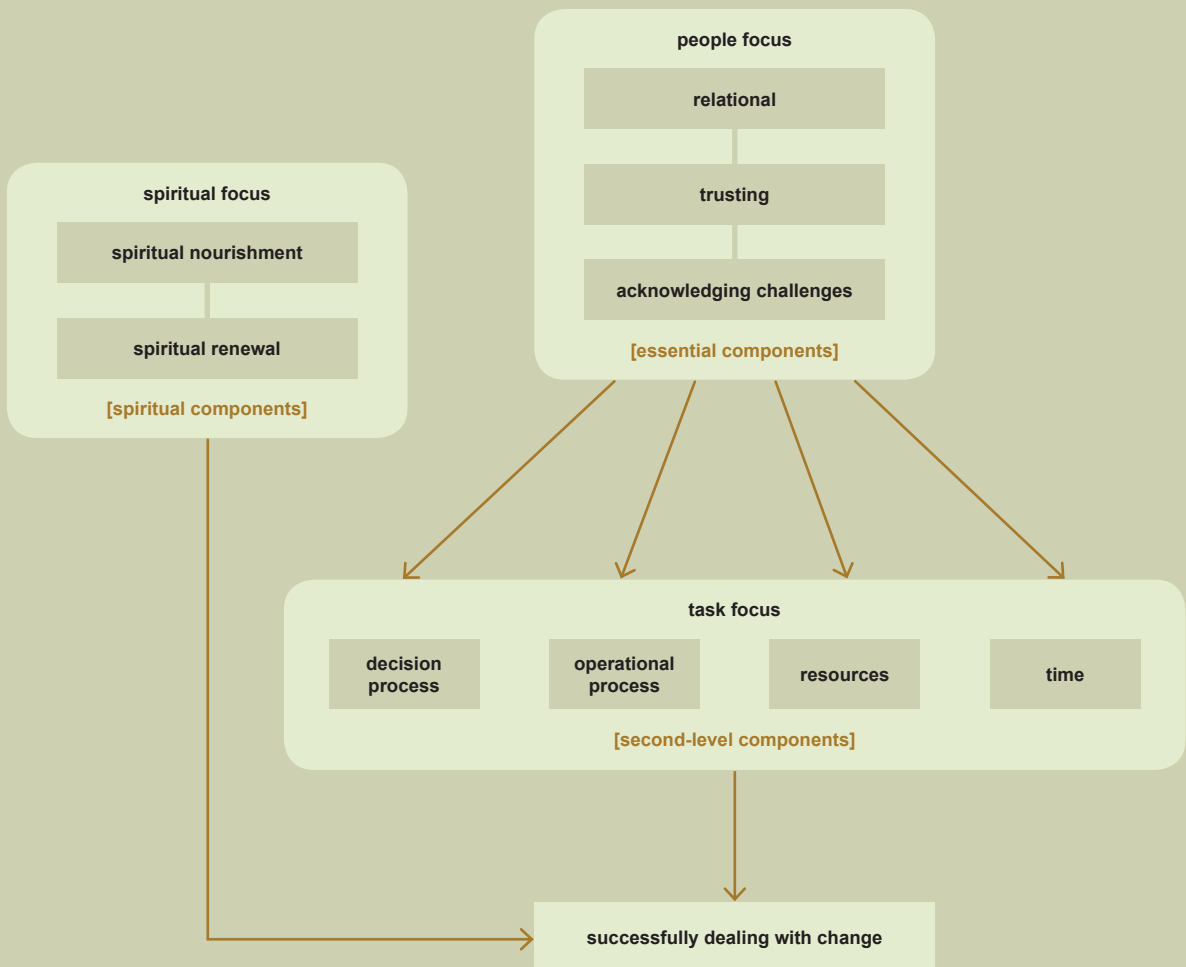
information” (T27); “being willing to send me out on a course” (T20); “teaching me how to do the job” (T3), and “providing a mentor to assist with [new] technology” (T7).

Interviewees also commented that, for teachers to be able to deal successfully with change, principals needed to address the issues relating to resources, knowledge and skills necessary to carry out their essential tasks. This was achieved through principals offering and providing opportunities for professional development, networking with others, advanced study, personal guidance, and induction for new staff members. Also, effective principals were reported as putting policies in place for

behaviour management, arranging teacher visits to other schools, and providing support in disciplining students.

Fourth, the *task focus* construct included providing appropriate *time allocations*. Leaders recognised that there is a *time* issue if teachers were to deal successfully with the challenges associated with change. Effective leaders found ways to lessen the time burden as indicated by the following interviewee responses: “My principal provides time to talk about issues and planning, et cetera” (T17); he/she “gives 90 minutes release time a week” (T13) and further, he/she “gives me valuable time to be more reflective in my classroom approach” (T21).

Figure 2: Dealing successfully with change: Principal's actions; model 2



Review

Leaders were seen to be most effective in helping teachers deal with change-associated challenges in their professional work environments, if they adopted both a people focus *and* a task focus approach. However, it needs to be emphasised that *the people focus was of primary importance to teachers*. Indeed, when leaders in a school overly focus on a task paradigm to the exclusion of a people paradigm, tension and frustration seem to occur.

Although 20 of the 28 teachers gave responses relating to their increasing dependence on God in their role as a teacher in a Christian school, it is interesting that the *spiritual focus* does not appear to be linked distinctly to either the *people focus* or the *task focus*. This should merit further investigation.

For many teachers, the spiritual dimension encompassed the values and beliefs that inspire and provide direction in their lives. Renewal in this area was critical for individuals' sense of peace and purpose and to withstand the challenges of daily life. Furthermore, spiritual enrichment was perceived as an essential component of a staff developmental program.

Spiritual enrichment could take the form of prayer, reading, listening to music or enjoying the beauty and serenity of nature. It was reported that some principals encourage spiritual enrichment by having retreat days held in a quiet setting away from the school. A typical retreat begins with an inspirational presentation and time for discussion followed by quiet time alone to reflect.

Further data are needed to explore possible interconnections between teachers' expressed spiritual dimension and other constructs in the model; that may enhance the *Principal's actions, model 2*, illustrated in Figure 2.

Conclusions and recommendations

The research led to a number of conclusions; summarised as follows:

1. Teachers identified the big challenges: Essentially a *scarcity of time* to accomplish an ever increasing list of demands as part of their professional role and the *likelihood of litigation*—a relatively recent challenge, that left them feeling threatened. There was also the perception of *under-resourcing* which needed addressing.
2. To enable teachers to deal with change-associated challenges, it is imperative that leaders primarily have a *people focus*—above all, being relational and generating trust when dealing with people—followed by a *task focus*, but they should also strengthen

the *spiritual* dimension of teachers' lives. Also, it is important for leaders to understand the interaction across these domains.

3. A *people focus* is a pre-requisite for generating systems to facilitate the process of adapting to change. Notwithstanding, there may still be difficulties because of teachers' individual dispositions.
4. To be effective in faith-based schools, leaders need to develop a sense of mission and spiritual purpose as part of their role set in assisting teachers to successfully deal with change-associated challenges.

The study was limited in being unable to examine subgroup differences. Also, the researcher did not have the option to perform follow-up interviews to tease out nuances of teachers' views. Both of these areas could be further explored. The study, nevertheless, should provide leadership at the system and school level with valuable insights about the perceived needs of employed teachers during a time of rapid change. **TEACH**

References

- Fullan, M. (2005). *Leading and sustainability: System thinkers in action*. San Francisco, CAL: Corwin Press/Sage
- Leithwood, K. & Jantzi, D. (2000). The effects of transformational leadership on organisational conditions and student engagement. *Journal of Educational Leadership*, 38(2), 112–119.
- McEwan, E. (2003). *Ten traits of highly effective principals: From good to great performance*. Thousand Oaks, CAL: Corwin Press.
- Matthes, A. (2011). The nexus between principals' leadership characteristics and primary teachers' response to challenges of change. *Teach Journal of Christian Education*, 5(2), 34–41.
- Mitchell, L., Cameron, M. & Wylie, C. (2002). *Sustaining school improvement: Ten primary schools' journeys*. Wellington, New Zealand: N.Z. Council for Educational Research.
- Additional references, cited in the *quantitative* phase of this research study, are not repeated here, but may be located in Matthes (2011, p. 41).

“When leaders in a school overly focus on a task paradigm to the exclusion of a people paradigm tension and frustration seem to occur”