

Caring for a small school: A reflection from the field

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Abstract

The author, a primary school principal, reflects upon 15 years working in the same very small school and suggests three ways of caring for such a school. He argues that all experienced small school principals are, simultaneously, and to varying degrees, system followers, stewards and administrators. However, inexperienced principals need to develop these ways of being beginning with star-followership, moving onto stewardship, and finally school administrator. Each way of being responsible for a school is discussed in depth.

Keywords: administration, management, leadership, stewardship, small school

Introduction

Southworth (2005), the editor of the book, 'Developing Leadership: Creating the Schools of Tomorrow,' summarised the work of his 18 contributors and formed the very strong opinion that school leadership is contingency based. He stated that while some general principles about leadership can be taught and learnt; outstanding leadership is, 'exquisitely sensitive to the context in which it is exercised (p.159).' From this standpoint Southworth (2005 p.160) then raised the question of how much leadership development should be, 'context specific and how much should be generic.' He states the context relates to the type of school and its level of performance. Southworth goes on to say that the context also relates to the career phase of the school leader (i.e. is s/he beginning, emergent or experienced).

In keeping with the title of the journal, 'Contemporary Educational Leadership, the present paper will reflect upon my current thinking about running my little school and how it might be applied to other small school settings. From the outset I will admit that I have no grand theory to share; I only offer my own theory of practice, as it stands at the moment. In this way my paper is at least contemporary for me, but is it fashionable for others? My main hope for my theory of practice is that it is at least coherent. Dorczak (2014, p.7) observed that, 1/ Many school management and leadership practices have been transplanted from the business world and are 'highly contaminated with managerialism', 2/He also states that these general management practices do not have an educational imperative at their centre (p.8) and, 3/ That the majority come from English-US contexts with little sensitivity for other cultures (p.8). Am I guilty of these charges? Partly.

I think running a small school requires a person to be a follower, a steward, and an administrator. And, while it is possible for move from follower to administrator in a linear way, the reality is, that depending on circumstances and experience, school principals, may sit anywhere along the continuum simultaneously. With an administrative persona one might observe aspects of managerialism, but there is, in my model at least, a clearly defined educational centre. Another point of departure between what I advocate and managerialism is that I see small schools as communities filled with people and not, organisations filled with functions. As to the third charge I have cited a lot of my own work but included authors from

many other places.

Background

This paper is subtitled, 'reflections from the field.' This is because, despite holding a doctorate of education, I am not an academic. I am a government school principal in the state of Victoria, Australia, and with the exception of two terms, one for long service leave and the other when I was seconded to a larger school, I have been the principal of my current school since 2002. Relating this to Southworth's observations above, I would describe myself as an experienced principal for the context in which I work.

This year, 2016, my small rural school enrolled 19 primary school students. My staff is also small but very experienced, and both have been at the school longer than me. My business manager comes to my school for just one day a week and my part-time teacher attends on three days each week. Being the principal of such a small school means I have a substantial teaching load (about 0.8) and for two days each week I teach the entire school by myself. Visiting teachers provide language teaching (Japanese), library and art. My part-time teacher looks after physical education and the younger children (up to and including most of the grade twos).

In the Victorian state education system educators can apply for any advertised position at any government school. Hiring is local while salary and award conditions are set centrally. School principals work five-year contracts and contract renewals are a matter for the regional director with advice from the principal's line manager and the president of the school

council (a parent). Every four years the school conducts a review of its performance and develops a quadrennial strategic plan outlining its intentions in student achievement, student engagement and student wellbeing, as well as productivity improvements. Each year, the principal produces an annual report for the previous year and develops an annual plan for the current year. The principal and everyone who works in the school is expected to have a personal development plan for that year. A line manager works with the principal to develop his/her plan, while it is the principal who performs that task for the staff within the school. Successful completion of the performance plan leads to pay increases until the upper range is reached. Terminating employment is not easy and is managed by central office.

During my time as the principal of my school I completed a part-time doctorate of education where I compared and contrasted how teaching and non-teaching principals fostered culture in their schools (Farrell, 2009). And, for five years I coordinated a leadership development program for local teachers seeking promotion or positions of responsibility (Farrell, 2014a). Since my doctorate I have written refereed papers, magazine articles, theses, and personal memos. These can be found on academia.edu; I have a visible reflective practice and this essay reflects my own views not necessarily the department of education I work for.

System Follower

I would argue that few school principals are entirely independent of accountability as all schools function within a reg-

ulatory legal framework. In addition to these formal frameworks, principals will often belong to clusters, networks and/or regional grouping of schools, each with their own demands and ways of operating. Principals will maintain personal, and/or institutional, membership of professional associations and many of these have certification programs. There is also the school itself. Any school with a history will have in place systems for the development and management of the budget, preserving infrastructure and providing resources, and dealing with staff. There will be established procedures for planning, and for solving problems. Therefore, I think all contemporary school principals must practice followership. In previous writing I have made much of the general dispositions of followers (Farrell, 2014a, p.24) but here only one kind has relevance to the present discussion. Star-followers are positive, dynamic, self-starting people who can work without supervision and add value to the organisation. They are active agents in their professional lives; and to me that sounds like an effective school principal.

In a study of Russian and Belarus followers, Prilipko, Antelo and Henderson (2011, p.88) determined that desirable followership attributes could be ranked in order of importance. These were:

- 1) Reliability as a group member,
- 2) A facility for supporting others,
- 3) A facility for contribution to the group,
- 4) Conceptual understanding,
- 5) Emotional intelligence,
- 6) A facility for group relations and functions,
- 7) A facility for effective communication,
- 8) Flexibility,

- 9) Motivation for goal accomplishment,
- 10) A facility for interpersonal relations,
- 11) Tolerance, and
- 12) A facility for learning and embracing change.

They found there was little difference between men and women with respect to the ranking of any of the attributes listed and while this is an ordinal ranking, it is interesting to note that a facility for learning and embracing change was ranked last by the study group. It is noteworthy that task-based qualities like being reliable, supportive, and able to contribute to, and understand the work, were rated more highly than interpersonal attributes. Prilipko et. al. (2011, p.89) concluded that:

[W]e posit that the process of followers' attributes development can be portrayed as a staircase: A gradual progression from novice to intermediate to expert skill levels. However, it is critical to keep in mind that the process of follower attributes development is a unique process, which has its own route for each individual; there is no known general model for the development of follower-ship skills.

In Chapter 1 of their book, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Lave and Wenger (1991) discuss communities of practice and the concept of legitimate peripheral participation and the socialising effect this has on the novice as they gravitate, in a centripetal way, towards the attitudes, values and practices of the more experienced performers in that work space. I would argue that the gradual accrual of knowledge, skills

and pre-dispositions of the star-follower, can build to the point when that person is ready for greater responsibility and accountability; they are ready to take on a small school.

School Steward

Sergiovanni's (2006, 1992) stewardship model emphasises schools as communities rather than organisations, where meaning is of more importance than behaviour. Under a stewardship approach all the stakeholders share a moral purpose around meeting the needs of students and it is the model I advocate for people taking charge of small schools like my own for the first time. It requires all of the attributes present in the star-follower discussed above, plus these three: 1/ A facility to act professionally, 2/ A facility to manage time and energy and, 3/ multi-level teaching expertise (Farrell, 2010,p.23).

According to one dictionary definition to be professional is to demonstrate skill, competence, expertise, ability, effectiveness, and to be qualified. However, Burns (2008, p.4) has noted that the appellation of professional to various occupations and operations had changed over time and that far more claimants exist today than in earlier times. Burns (2008,p.12) stated that past ideas of professionalism were concerned with legal and ethical terms predicated on a principled response based on a fiduciary relationship with the client, to what is now a justification in the expectation of compliance from the professional to act professionally. This is a contrasting view of the professionals of earlier times who were expected to demonstrate far more independence and

suffer much less scrutiny. When I identified the criteria, to act professionally, my intended meaning encompassed both the steward carrying out their duties in a way that acts for the benefit of others (i.e. fiduciary) and compliance with my employers expectations with respect to my performance. Burns (2008, p.10) wondered whether professional behaviour was more to do with, 'individual commitments not individual integrity'. To act professionally, in the sense of being the steward of a small school, is to act within the regulatory legal framework, meeting the normative-instrumental expectations of the system, and to commit to a fiduciary relationship with the stakeholders in the school.

The facility to manage time and energy is critical if one is not to be overwhelmed by the range of tasks carried out by the small school principal (Starr and White, 2008). Small school principals perform many of the same tasks as their larger school colleagues but without the support of a leadership team or clerical support (p. 3). Some of these tasks are important and some are urgent, but not all urgent tasks are important. Experienced and effective school stewards are able to weigh up the potential consequences of an opportunity asking the question, will this be good for the school or a future problem? In very small schools there may be little or no chance to delegate and it is the principal who will expend valuable time and energy 'managing' an opportunity. Under these conditions leverage becomes an important concept for the school steward to understand. Leverage is about getting the greatest return from the least amount of effort and/or expenditure of resources.

With this in mind, the school community and small school principal must be aligned around a set of shared values so that the school takes on those opportunities that prosecute its agenda and ignores those that do not.

Schools are awash with events, some of which might be described as a critical incident or crisis (Farrell, 2013). For small school principals the more adverse situations generally involve people:

Good stakeholder relationships are especially important in any school but they are critical in a small school setting, where for more successful leaders, these relationships form part of the [approach] by which they lead and manage their school. The leaders of the small schools in this study reacted to these situations by remaining focussed on students and their needs, and by being outwardly professional in their response, because the fallout can divide the community. When a situation was particularly difficult, they would do their homework, seek outside specialist advice, and/or follow laid-down processes and departmental procedures. These small school leaders appeared to accept that 'winning' is not necessary to a successful resolution but sometimes the only possible outcome was that people moved on and left the school and that, this too, was a process that needed to be properly managed. (Farrell, 2013,p.4)

Finally, the most demanding task for the teaching principal is teaching a multi-level classroom (Farrell, 2009, p.129). As I write this and reflect on my own school of 19 students I have five foundation students, two grade ones, three

grade twos, four grade threes, four grade fours, a grade five and no grade six students. One student is funded for intellectual disability and one is clearly autistic with speech pathology. Another student appears to be operating at secondary school level in some of areas of the curriculum. In fact, many students are ahead of their grade expectation and a couple are below. As a registered school we are expected to follow the department's state curriculum and this has been the subject of much thought by me (Farrell, 2014b). It is difficult to cover the curriculum in the way a larger school might with teachers and classes for each grade and scope and sequence documents for each subject. In a small school environment much depends on the make-up and motivation of the children in the class. It is a situation that has to be managed. Our school's pedagogical approach is called the 'Six Rs' while our delivery of curriculum is called the 'Six Ways of Thinking.'

The Six Rs are: reading, writing, 'rith-matic, researching, retelling and reasoning. These approaches are integrated where possible so that our students can integrate their learning and teachers make better use of time. The first three Rs are common enough in any primary school. Researching is about finding things out and differentiating between quality information and those ideas not backed up by the evidence. Retelling is about sharing ideas, concepts and information in ways that are orthodox or novel. And we say that a person who can reason can appreciate different points of view, and make sensible arguments for their own.

The Six Rs approach does extend into the senior class. However, the senior class

curriculum has many more subjects than the juniors, and to teach these in an authentic way we have developed our own Six Ways of Thinking; which are:

- 1) Thinking with Language,
- 2) Thinking Mathematically,
- 3) Thinking Aesthetically,
- 4) Thinking Scientifically,
- 5) Thinking Systematically and,
- 6) Situated Thinking.

Every subject in our state curriculum can be re-cast into a way of thinking and thus by focussing on the intent rather than the specifics of a subject we can deliver a coherent and well thought out curriculum to a multi-level classroom (Farrell, 2014b).

My theory of practice is that star-followers can develop the pre-disposition necessary for school administration if they transition through the school steward model. This interim step of being professional, in both a fiduciary and in a normative-instrumental sense, a manager of time and energy through being true to agreed upon values, applying the concept of leverage to their work, and accepting that what is done is about the community and not about winning. Being an effective teacher of a multi-level classroom was critical as it is here where the least amount of support will be found. While this is considered an interim step, small school principals may remain in steward mode for much of their working lives. My proposal, based upon my own experience is that the evolving small school principal should, in time, develop an administrator persona.

School Administrator

From the outset, I do have reservations about the word leadership. It is such a contestable word and it, along with terms like management and bureaucrat, can mean different things to different people. One definition I like is that provided by Edwin Schein (1992,p.12), ‘Leaders change the culture, managers live in one.’ My own preference is to use the word administrator as an umbrella label beneath which manager, leader and bureaucrat can comfortably sit. All three, are to my mind, simply biases or orientations to administration and each can exist in pure or blended forms simultaneously (Farrell 2009,p.13). Not all school events, tasks and relationships require leadership in the sense of, ‘follow me I know where we are going,’ some things are routine while others need very specific management.

A leadership-orientated school administrator looks to change the culture of the organisation rather than live within it. S/he thinks very long term and strategically. The leadership style is transformational and big on communication (that is that we share a sense of mission and are empowered to act).

The bureaucratic administrator deals with the routine day to day issues of running their school through reacting rather than being proactive. There is a reliance on systems and processes and the administrative style may be transactional (that is I have things that you want and you will do what I want to get those things).

A managerial school administrator is more proactive and future orientated. S/he acts on values, sets targets, makes and implements plans and organises resourc-

es. The mind-set is tactical rather than routine or strategic. The administrative style is normative-instrumental (that is we are all professionals here and we all know how professionals are expected to behave).

In my doctoral research (Farrell, 2009) I compared and contrasted principals with high teaching loads (teaching-principals) with principals with high administrative loads (non-teaching principals) and had my study group rank their felt responsibilities. The responsibilities are shown here in alphabetical order (p. 55):

- 1) Curriculum (combines teaching and learning),
- 2) Data.
- 3) Finance (combines budgets and grant applications and some auditing responsibility),
- 4) Infrastructure (combines buildings and grounds, audits and inspections),
- 5) Liaison (combines community role, reporting to others, networking),
- 6) Planning,
- 7) Resources,
- 8) Safety, security and welfare,
- 9) Staff (combines staffing, staff performance and development), and
- 10) Students.

I observed in my small study of experienced principals (Farrell 2009), that the most significant responsibility felt by teaching-principals was for, ‘Students’ followed by ‘Staff’ and then ‘Liaison’ (p.108). For my non-teaching principals they ranked, ‘Data’ first and ‘Planning’ a very close second and placed ‘Curriculum’ third (p.109). The major differences between the two groups centres on the place of ‘Students’ which was the focus

of teaching-principals and the importance of 'Data' and the 'Plan' for non-teaching principals to lead change in their schools.

For the non-teaching principals in my small study, 'Students' and 'Curriculum' are bureaucratic responsibilities while teaching-principals manage their 'Students' and their 'Curriculum'. Another difference was around 'Finance' and 'Resources' where teaching-principals handle this bureaucratically and non-teaching principals manage these responsibilities. (Farrell, 2009 p. 124)

In my opinion a school administrator needs to exhibit the following eight pre-dispositions in addition to those already mentioned for the star-follower and school steward above. These are:

- 1) Communicate and get commitment,
- 2) Risk goodwill and lead,
- 3) Delegate and empower,
- 4) Implement bureaucratic systems,
- 5) Exercising your authority,
- 6) Use an educational management model,
- 7) Fix broken relationships, and
- 8) Use an evidence-based decision-making process.

Of my eight pre-dispositions for school administrator three come under my definition of a leadership bias. Leadership is made evident in the things you say and do and how you bring people with you and empower them with your vision. A vision can only be shared if it is spoken or written about by the many stakeholders affected. And it can only be committed to after there has been the time and space to consider it in full. The ability to facilitate effective communication was an attribute of a star-follower, albeit

listed in seventh place, while the school steward had a responsibility for prosecuting a shared agenda and ensuring all stakeholders are aligned behind it. What changes for a school administrator compared to the school steward is the scale of communication and level of commitment required from followers. Having a vision is a completely different mind-set to simply maintaining an orderly environment. As is said in the vernacular, 'you have to walk the walk and talk the talk.' Your stakeholders should not be surprised by what you say or do, nor about the things you promise to do. Your communication and commitment to the school and the people concerned with it has to be coherent, consistent and complete and, in the case of a vision, captivating.

The school administrator must be prepared to risk goodwill and lead their schools. The fiduciary mind-set of the school steward is based on the community trusting the principal to, 'do things right rather than doing the right thing.' School stewards realise that goodwill is a currency that is hard to earn but all too quickly spent,' and they need to be very aware of the constraints imposed by their context (Starr and White, 2008). However, the leadership bias of a school administrator demands that some risks have to be taken. Prilipko et. al. (2011) noted that embracing change and learning was the last ranked attribute of followers while Schein (1992, p.12) noted that leaders create and change culture while managers live within them. It is important to realise that I am not talking about an all or nothing risk, but any proposed change needs to be communicated to the appropriate stakeholders and endorsed by them.

In his book, 'The Theory and Practice of Educational Administration,' Musaazi (1982) provides a great discussion about delegation. What responsibilities to delegate, both formally, and informally, will depend on the nature of the task, the skills and experience of the available subordinates and the climate of acceptance apparent in the organization. A part of good administration is the ability to discriminate between those tasks we should do ourselves and those we might delegate to others. Delegation difficulties can arise due to a lack of confidence in the capabilities of one's subordinates or concerns about overburdening them, especially for a small staff (Farrell, 2009, p.107). Prilipko et. al. (2011,p.83) observed that empowerment only occurred between effective [star] followers and effective leaders [administrators]; noting that empowerment could only take place where the follower had a conceptual understanding of the task. In my small doctoral study (Farrell, 2009,p.106) I observed that teaching-principals appeared to delegate tasks that freed up their time contrasting with their non-teaching colleagues who tended to pass on more noteworthy tasks to their subordinates. Delegation and empowerment are keys to distributed leadership and to the growth and development of star-followership (Prilipko et. al., 2011,p.83).

Just two pre-dispositions for a school administrator might be considered bureaucratic and they are implementing bureaucratic systems and exercising authority. Bureaucracies exist because they handle the routine day-to-day tasks very well however, as a consequence of their size, small schools tend not to have many

procedures or protocols in place and thus, are at risk of having to re-learn what to do every single time they are faced with a normal but irregular situation, or worse, being inconsistent in their response to common issues (e.g. enrolling a student mid-year). For the school steward much has been made of his/her professionalism and fiduciary duty to the school but what if the principal or a member of staff changes? Will the new person respond in exactly the same way as the previous incumbent? Without making reference to existing documentation and practice, the answer is probably no. The fully evolved school administrator will have implemented bureaucratic systems.

To do their work school principals are given the authority to lead and manage their organizations. Authority is the power to make decisions. A superior has the power to transmit a decision with the reasonable expectation that it will be accepted by a subordinate, who in turn has an expectation that such decisions will be transmitted, and will adjust his/her behaviour in line with this expectation (Musaazi, 1982). However, how a school administrator exercises power and authority is mediated by the organizational culture of their workplace. In school steward mode a principal may never make a tough decision like doing the right thing and changing the school's direction or calling someone on their behaviour.

Three pre-dispositions for school administration might be considered managerial and these are educational management, fixing broken relationships, and evidence-based decision-making. Developing the pre-disposition for educational management rather than that of a class-

room teacher with some administrative responsibilities means taking on the biases of the non-teaching principals discussed earlier. Where data and the plan take on greater importance than they might have previously under a purely steward-based approach. In addition, curriculum, school finances and resources (physical and human) might be dealt with in a more managerial way rather than simply reacting or responding to situations. This shift of emphasis does not mean that students and staff become less important to you.

Insisting on positive stakeholder relationships should be a matter of bureaucratic routine but all too often it is the cause of the greatest strain and some relationships have to be managed. In my doctoral study (Farrell, 2009, p.135) I concluded that schools with dysfunctional stakeholder relationships may benefit from outside assistance because positive relationships are critical to school culture. I observed that some of my participants, all experienced, failed to achieve even normative-instrumental relationships because of argumentative staff, fractured school councils, misbehaving students, irrational parents, and/or due to the high turnover of relatively inexperienced staff. While each relationship with a stakeholder can have unique characteristics, the school's processes have to be coherent and consistent. If there is to be any fallout resulting from the breakdown then head office will be concerned departmental guidelines and directions were observed.

A notable pre-disposition of experienced non-teaching principals in my doctoral study was the importance they placed on data and the plan to drive change in their school (Farrell, 2009,p.109). They

employed evidence-based decision-making to implement a well-thought out plan where all resources are managed to achieve a clearly defined outcome. In my introduction I explained that each year I undergo an annual performance plan process and write a one-year plan for the school for the upcoming year. This 12-month plan is derived from a quadrennial strategic plan. It is important that these plans do not become ends in themselves. It is equally important that they represent real targets requiring authentic work. Sending a plan back and forth between the school and head office so that the language looks right is not a good use of time or energy. Usually at my school, the plans are already being worked on before head office signs off on them.

My construct of a school administrator is a mix of bureaucratic, managerial and leadership biases. Bureaucratic attributes included implementing bureaucratic systems, and using authority. Managerial attributes were concerned with becoming an educational manager, using an evidence-base for decision-making and planning, and fixing broken relationships. The leadership attributes applied to communication and commitment, risking goodwill and leading, and delegation and empowerment. It is not necessary to implement each attribute at once. Neither is it necessary to generate them from all within. The system you work for will have its own expectations and accountabilities and by complying with these, being a star-follower to the system and the steward of your school, many of the attributes attributed to school administrator discussed above will be brought to the fore.

Conclusion

In my judgement, caring for a school is contextual and, while much is written about school leadership, it would be fair to say that it is not about small school leadership. And yet, this is where many principal careers begin. This essay is concerned with small school leadership and how to make the transition from a star-follower to school administrator via the school stewardship model. For some individuals the full transition may not happen until they take up the reins of a larger school but for others, myself included, being responsible for a small school is professionally and personally satisfying and may well be an end-point in itself. My theory of practice suggests that the journey to school leadership begins with star-followership, and thus it begins with a person's first appointment as a beginning teacher. Some individuals will fail, or choose not to cross, this first hurdle and never achieve star-followership, but many will succeed and the time and effort taken to accrue the attributes of star-followership are not wasted, they are valued and necessary to being a principal. Next, in my jurisdiction at least, the person applies for and is appointed the principal of a small, usually rural, school. That means becoming a system follower and being responsible for everything in the school. This is where my theory of practice recommends you become the steward of your school. This model is a worthy way to be in its own right, but more importantly, it gives you the time and space to grow into the school administrator persona. My theory of practice uses the word administrator as an umbrella term for leader,

manager and bureaucrat. As the evolving principal gains experience s/he will be all of these things depending on the issue, the context, and the people involved. On becoming an administrator, we do not discard what it is to be a steward: Being professional in a fiduciary and accountability sense, being an effective user of time and energy, and having multi-level teaching expertise. These are each fantastic attributes for any school principal to have.

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