

# **Faith school management teams: Adding neglected perspectives to the field**

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*Abstract: This paper reports the initial findings of a doctoral research project which aims to uncover how members of faith school management teams understand and practise educational leadership. The study purposively selected three Western Australian faith schools which included a Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Islamic school. Qualitative data collection methods were employed to develop insights into the members' understandings of educational leadership, how their understandings connected to practice, and how the understandings and practices varied between the faith school contexts. The initial findings from one school are examined indicating the extent to which understandings and practices of educational leadership are influenced by the leader's own beliefs, values and experiences as well as the school's affiliated faith.*

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to report the initial findings of a doctoral research project which aims to uncover how members of faith school management teams understand and practise educational leadership. The paper begins by outlining the argument for focusing the investigation on faith schools. The paper then explains the research design and methodology that was adopted for the study. Finally, the initial findings from one school are examined indicating the extent to which the understandings and practices of educational leadership are influenced by the leader's own beliefs, values and experiences as well as the school's affiliated faith.

## **Educational Importance**

It is generally accepted within the field of educational leadership research that educational leadership is an important aspect of schools and contributes to their effectiveness (Leithwood and Riehl, 2003). However, it might be argued that understandings of educational leadership have been limited because research has traditionally emphasized the role of the principal while neglecting the perspectives of other school leaders (Heck and Hallinger, 1999; Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, 2001). Considering the view that educational leadership is a social and interactive process that involves a variety of leaders (Leithwood and Riehl, 2003; Woods, 2005)

it is crucial that a more comprehensive understanding of educational leadership be developed through the consideration of multiple perspectives.

Furthermore, it could be argued that understandings of educational leadership have been limited by neglecting to take into account the extent to which contextual factors influence understandings and practices (Bush and Glover, 2003). In view of William Foster's (1989, p. 42) statement that educational leadership is "always context bound" it is important to recognize how contextual factors can shape this complex topic. Additionally, recent work in the field also emphasizes the importance of centring investigations of educational leadership within the school's context (Sullivan, 2006; Spillane et al., 2004). Such viewpoints justify focusing investigations of educational leadership within the schools' setting so that full cognisance is taken of contextual circumstances.

Faith schools have distinctive contexts that are amenable for developing such insights into educational leadership understandings and practices. The contexts of faith schools are considered distinct as a result of their distinguishing purposes, characteristics and ethos which impact on the school's aims and environments (Halstead and McLaughlin, 2005; McGettrick, 2005; Sacks, 2004). These purposes and ethos are influenced by the particular faith of the school, the school's religious traditions as well as the processes the school uses to select students and hire staff (Halstead and McLaughlin, 2005; McGettrick, 2005). It seems self-evident that these distinct contexts along with the values and beliefs of the school's faith may influence the ways in which educational leadership is understood and practised (McGettrick, 2005; Sacks, 2004) by personnel within the organization.

### **Faith schools: International Context**

It is acknowledged that faith schools are expanding in number, growing in diversity and becoming an important part of education systems worldwide (Grace, 2004; Lawton and Cairns, 2005; Shah, 2006; Symes and Gulson, 2005). As a result of this expansion a complex public debate as to whether or not such schools should receive national government support has developed over the past few years and has raised questions concerning the type of education such schools provide (Grace, 2003). But

despite faith schools' growing importance they tend to be on the periphery of any attempts to understand critical issues within the field of education (Grace, 2003). It is recognized that research investigating faith schools has been conducted but much of that research tends to focus on Catholic schools and is set within the context of the United States (Arthur, 2005, Grace 2003). Hence, the study reported here has the potential to add to the current understandings of this complex topic not least because it is located in Australia.

### **Faith Schools: Australian context**

Australian faith schools are broadly referred to as non-government schools and are more specifically categorized as Catholic or independent schools. It is important to note that 85 percent of independent schools maintain a religious affiliation (Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2008). Faith schools are partially funded and operate under the educational requirements set by national and state/territory government authorities (ISCA, 2008). In addition, faith schools are overseen by state Catholic or independent school authorities (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2007).

Recent statistics detail the consistent growth of the Australian non-government school sector. Over the period of 1997-2007, the number of students attending non-government schools increased by nearly twenty-five percent while the number of students attending government schools grew by just under 2 percent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). In addition, the same statistics reveal that as of August 2007 nearly 30 percent of all Australian schools were classified as a non-government school (ABS, 2008).

Similar to the international context, the rise and growing prominence of faith schools have generated a range of opinions. As a result, these opinions have contributed to debates surrounding the purpose of publicly-funded faith schools within the Australian education system and have raised concerns at the national government level. Earlier in the year an article reported the remarks of a senior government education advisor on the rise of faith schools who said that "if we continue as we are, I think we'll just become more and more isolated sub-groups in our community" (Bachelard, February

28, 2008). That same article reported the comments of another critic who similarly stated that faith-based schools “are balkanising the community” (Bachelard, February 28, 2008). Additionally, others have offered their impressions of faith schools describing them as “authoritarian” and creating a “society of ‘moral sheep’ ” (Law, cited by O’Keeffe, 2007).

In contrast, there are opinions that portray faith schools in a more positive light. One view, specifically referring to Catholic schools, characterized these schools as a supportive open-minded context where educators are encouraged to keep the school’s religious views and beliefs in mind but to also encourage students to think openly and practise questioning (Densley cited by O’Keeffe, 2007). On a more fundamental level, those in charge of leading faith based schools say “they are offering a choice in education” (Bachelard, February 28, 2008). It appears that parents are taking advantage of this arrangement as they continue ‘flocking’ to faith schools in spite of the varied opinions (O’Keeffe, 2007).

### **WA context**

In the context of Western Australia (WA), the non-government school sector has also flourished over the past decade. During the period 1997-2007, nearly all of the new schools established in Western Australia were either a Catholic or independent school, increasing from 264 schools in 1997 to 299 schools in 2007 (ABS, 2008). While in comparison, government schools increased by just two schools (ABS, 2008). Consequently, WA non-government schools are responsible for educating a third of all WA students (ABS, 2008) and account for nearly a third of all schools (Department of Education and Training, 2008). In WA approximately 120 of the 150 independent schools have a religious affiliation and the types of affiliations are far ranging including Anglican and Catholic as well as Jewish, Islamic, Baptist and Greek Orthodox schools (Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia, 2007).

It is clear that within the Australian and West Australian contexts faith schools are an increasingly important part of their educational systems. Yet in spite of their strong presence, research that relates to educational leadership in faith schools is scarce. The empirical research on educational leadership in Australia and WA has primarily

focused on state schools and principals. Additionally, the educational leadership research conducted in faith schools has tended to focus on Catholic schools and on the role of the principal. From this perspective, the context of WA faith schools provides an interesting backdrop to the study which investigates the ways in which educational leadership is understood and practised by members of management teams in different faith schools. The next section details the design and methodology that informed this qualitative multiple-case study.

### **Study Design and Methodology**

It was determined that the adoption of the interpretive perspective best served the aim of the reported study to uncover the individual understandings on educational leadership. In accordance with the interpretive perspective the following central research question was formulated:

How do the members of management teams in different faith schools understand and practise educational leadership?

It was also determined that the study adopt a case study design as case studies are concerned with investigating a single phenomenon “within its real-life context” (Yin, 1994, p. 13). Therefore, it was necessary to identify specific cases that would be rich in information in order to “illuminate the questions under study” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). Consequently, purposeful sampling was used as the strategy to select the case schools and the participants in order to gain insights into educational leadership understandings and practices.

The final sample comprised three composite faith schools, namely a Catholic, Islamic and Greek Orthodox. Initially, it was intended to select a sample of four schools; however, one school declined to participate in the study and the sample was limited to three. The three faith schools were selected on the basis that the faith school had distinct aims and environments that are influenced by the school’s affiliation with a particular faith.

The participants in the study were drawn from the members of the faith school's management team. The selected participants included the principal, the deputy principal or assistant principal and the heads of sub schools from each faith school. In addition, other members of the team such as the bursar, director of mission, dean of student and dean of curriculum participated in the study.

### **Data collection**

In order to uncover the individuals' understandings and practices of educational leadership the study employed four methods of qualitative data collection: concept mapping, semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation and document analysis. The data collection process began with non-participant observations which were conducted at each school with most participants. During this time school related documents were also identified and collected. These two methods were employed to develop a contextual understanding of the schools and provide a descriptive foundation to the study. The other two data collection methods, concept mapping and semi-structured interviews were combined into one activity. This activity was utilized after the observations were completed and was employed to develop insights into each participant's understandings and practices of educational leadership.

### **Data Analysis**

In order to build an understanding of educational leadership that is grounded in the collected data the study adopted Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory approach for the data analysis. The reported study used open coding as the first stage of the analytical process. Open coding was used to break down the collected data into named concepts and then group them together to form named categories. Axial coding was used as the second stage of the process which further developed the categories. This was achieved by making new connections between the categories and by identifying its specifying features (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

In addition, memos and diagramming were used to assist the analysis process. Memos were created to document abstract ideas and served as written records of analysis. Diagrams were used to develop ideas generated from the data in a visual and creative way and recorded the development of the analysis. The process of data collection has

been completed in two of the case schools and the data from one school has been analyzed to generate the first case study.

### **Some Emerging Findings**

#### **Case One: Leading as a collective**

This Greek Orthodox school, established in 1991, currently serves approximately 500 students from a variety of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The school is located in a middle-class suburban area and is owned and run by the nearby Hellenic Community.

The title of the case, 'leading as a collective', is an *in-vivo* code generated from the interview data. The data analysis identified four shared approaches to leadership which make up the central categories of the case: "being supportive", "leading the learning", "nurturing a positive environment" and "building relationships". These categories form a framework that helps to explain the members' understandings and practices of educational leadership. By way of illustration, this paper focuses on two of these categories, 'being supportive' and 'nurturing a positive environment', in order to demonstrate the extent to which their perspectives are influenced by personal beliefs, values and experiences as well as the school's faith.

#### 'Being supportive'

The first category, 'being supportive' is broken-down into four key properties: 'be accessible', 'collaborate', 'acknowledge' and 'empower'. Each property represents a way in which the leaders define and practise support and may be illustrated through particular accounts. The first property, 'being accessible' is captured by the thoughts of one leader:

I suppose a lot of time I am trying to pick everyone else up when they are down and it's not only work issues...they have at home issues...you have to counsel them... I think it is vital that people feel that they have time to come and see me and talk to me. I don't want people to think they have to make appointments all the time to see me, if they have a problem they can just knock on my door (P1 Int Aug 18).

The second property of being supportive is deemed to occur through ‘collaboration’. This is articulated by one example of how collaboration is evident at the school and how it connects to aspects of ‘being supportive’:

Although each one of us has different responsibilities we come together and report on our various areas and share both successes and possible areas of failure or concerns that we have and try to build on the experience of others and use the experience of others and support of others to help us through the difficult challenges (P3 Int Aug 19).

‘Acknowledgement’ and ‘empowerment’ are the third and fourth properties which relate to how these leaders strive to promote professionalism and value the work of others:

I do try to give a lot of positive reinforcement back. I make a point to thank them for all their hard work and acknowledge it or it goes unsaid. It’s something that the principal does really well, he makes you feel valued. It’s something that I have learned from him and so I try to make my staff feel valued (P2 Int Aug 19)

These leaders’ perspectives demonstrate that supporting the personal and professional needs of staff and their work is an important part of their leadership understandings and practices. In addition, the leaders’ perspectives illuminate how the leaders rely on and use the advice of their colleagues to guide and inform their leadership understandings and practices. Thus, the examples support the premise that these leaders’ perspectives are influenced to a certain degree by their interactions with their colleagues as well as their personal beliefs.

#### ‘Nurturing a positive environment’

The second category, ‘nurturing a positive environment’ is defined by two properties ‘through personal values’ and ‘through faith’. The first property ‘through personal values’ refers to various values the participants use to develop and support the culture of the school which included trust, respect, loyalty, tolerance, and sharing. In some cases, the participants’ connected these values to the school’s faith and their personal faith; therefore, illustrating the extent in which faith has an influence on leadership perspectives as exemplified by the following participant’s comments:

For me the faith and ethos is very very strong. I have strong beliefs and I like to pass that on to my staff or work with my staff towards having that so that we all interact in a way that support the ethos of the school. We teach the children to share, to be responsible, and to have love for each other. Their values underpin everything we do, definitely...Those sorts of things are a huge impact on how the leadership, how I run or how I lead is to always try to come back to that (P1 Int Aug 18).

A second participant's reflections also illustrate how the school's faith influences their work as leaders:

Schools that do have a faith underpinning them just have more certainty about where they are going. They have more confidence in delivering programs...maximizing the outcomes for the students...the staff... that are consistent with the faith they are supporting (P3 Int Aug 19)

We are school with high standards and those standards are inevitable linked with Christianity and with the church and high moral behaviour...It lends a strength to what we do...the Orthodox is a foundation for everything that we do at school and I think it really does improve the quality of what we do (P3 Int Aug 19).

These participants' viewpoints reveal how the faith of the school and personal connections to faith form a foundation for their leadership understandings and practices. It demonstrates the ways in which it influences the values of leaders and how these values are utilized to help inform their interactions with key stakeholders, such as students and parents. In addition, the comments convey how the school's faith is a distinct and significant factor which guides the work of leaders and improves the quality and effectiveness of their work. It is fair to say this initial analysis of participants' perspectives is beginning to shed some light on how faith can influence the understanding and practice of leadership.

## **Conclusions**

The two selected categories in this paper demonstrate the extent to which the leaders' personal beliefs, values and experiences as well as the school's affiliated faith influence their leadership perspectives. It could be argued that the initial findings of this case do not reveal anything particularly new about leaders' understandings and practices of educational leadership. What is suggested, however, is that these initial observations draw attention to how the leaders' perspectives are influenced by the school's faith and personal values.

Finally, it is clear that much more work needs to be done. First, the case described here needs to be further developed, especially in relation to how the school's faith and ethos may influence other aspects of their leadership perspectives. Second, it is hoped that the analysis of the other two cases in the study will contribute to a richer and more sophisticated understanding of the ways in which faith influences the members of management teams' perspectives of leadership.

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