Principals in NSW and school-centred education: principals' perceptions of their changed role and its personal impact during a time of system imposed reform

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PRINCIPALS IN NSW AND “SCHOOL-CENTRED EDUCATION”

Principals’ perceptions of their changed role and its personal impact during a time of system imposed reform.

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

MARIE LYALL, B.A; M Mgt.

DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT

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DECLARATION

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources have been acknowledged.

Marie Lyall
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of the Principal in NSW government schools. This included consideration of selected aspects of the required management skills of school Principals and the relationship of these competencies to the effectiveness and welfare of the individual Principal. The study also considers the effects of the increased devolution of responsibility to NSW government schools. In a devolved, school-centred system of education, Principals have been pivotal to the implementation and success of programs and system management. The original goal of this research project was to examine the effect of management skills of school executives on the learning climate of the school. However, in preliminary observation and discussion with school executives it became clear that it was the perception held by the Principal of the significantly changed role and the acquisition of essential management skills or competencies which were central to the process of change in the now NSW Department of Education and training (NSW DET). This system-wide change began as a result of the implementation in 1990 of the recommendations in School-Centred Education, the report of the review team led by Dr Brian Scott.

Since mid 1989 change has been virtually continuous in the administrative areas of the NSW education system. Whilst the major focus periods were 1992 and 1996 this study encompassed the implications of system change for Principals and the way in which they managed their schools over the period 1990 to 1996.

There has been continuing debate in the literature relating to the Principalship regarding the primary task of the Principal. The discussion focused mainly on whether the role primarily was that of instructional leader or of corporate manager. This study investigated the necessity and compatibility of both of these aspects of the Principal's role now perceived as requisite in NSW to implement the
devolution of management tasks to schools. In the approach developed for this study Principals themselves described the specific skills required, and the effects of the changed role on themselves and the school.

An extensive literature search in the areas of: management, leadership, change, effective schools, and educational administration provided the basis for the development of this study. The literature search also assisted the development of the questionnaire and interview processes used to investigate: the Principal's role; the skills Principals require; the support Principals have in managing a school from their formal training, and from the education system; the impact on the Principal of the task of managing a school during system wide structural change; and the effect of the change, as perceived by the Principal, on the school.

The sample for the study included primary, secondary and recently retired school Principals. Extensive questionnaires and interviews with Principals from diverse education regions were supplemented by questionnaires completed by Principals at NSW Principals' Conferences.

The results of this study indicated that the role of the Principal had changed significantly since the implementation of the recommendations in School-Centred Education. The data collected in this study demonstrated that primary and secondary Principals now have similar roles as a result of the devolution of responsibility to schools. The results indicated that newly appointed Principals were more likely to have accepted the restructured system and to have moved quickly through promotion levels. These Principals also reported dissatisfaction with their future length of time as a school Principal. Stress and its effects were described by respondents as a negative result of the role of the Principal during the time of rapid change. The final stage of this study revealed a significant level of concern by Principals for the lack of support from and consistency in practice by the NSW DET personnel in districts and directorates.
The responses to this study described the dysfunctional effect of rapid system change on the Principal's capacity to develop and enhance whole-school educational programs. The respondents did not observe any difference to the quality of the teaching and learning in the classroom as result of the implementation of the recommendations in *School-Centred Education*, nor as a result of policy changes made by a new government in 1995. Principals were concerned that they must spend the majority of their time on administrative tasks rather than on educational leadership. The results of the study indicated that in order to maintain a sense of control Principals were increasingly filtering demands made of the school by the system.

The study found that the Principals' need for training in management skills both increased and changed emphasis between the initial implementation of the system restructuring recommendations of *School Centred-Education* and the re-centralisation of the Carr Government. Initially the training need cited was for managing whole-school and curriculum planning. Later training in financial management was the reported priority, then industrial relations, and in the final stage of the study training in legal matters was raised as a priority.

The readings for this study provided a view of the interrelationship between the theory of business management and that of educational administration. The findings of the study indicated that the skills of business management are considered essential by Principals for their altered role since restructuring. The study has provided an analysis of the role of Principals in the NSW DET during a time of significant change. It has also described the Principals' reactions to the change and their recommendations for Principals for the future.