



Preparing Principals to Lead

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'Few jobs have as diverse an array of responsibilities as the modern principalship ... the demands of the job far exceed the capacity of most people ... only a small fraction of those who occupy the role are well trained to lead'

(Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2010, p. 8).

OVER THE LAST YEAR I have had the opportunity, along with eight other school leaders, to work with QASSP in a unique program to build school leader capability. The program developed our skills in research to contribute back to the field of education. This was the ideal way, following my Masters Degree, to determine whether I was prepared for the next step of a Research Higher Degree. The 12 months were spent focusing on analysing and deepening our knowledge in one field of school leadership. It was also an opportunity to build links with universities and academics currently engaged in research in these fields. For me, this was about unpacking what was known in the

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literature about principal preparation at a local, national and international level. This article is a summary of the paper co-written with Dr Louisa Tomas from James Cook University, following my review of the literature.

There is no doubt that the role of the school principal is complex and demanding. It is one that calls for effective leadership, given its influence on a range of important outcomes for schools and students. The leadership provided by the principal is critical to bring about school improvement. It is also widely accepted that principal leadership and influence is second only to classroom instruction among school related factors that impact upon student outcomes. In spite of its importance, the role of the principal is becoming increasingly unattractive to both qualified and less experienced applicants.

Significant changes to the role of the principal have occurred over the last three decades. These changes have made principals' work more challenging than ever. The degree of accountability to statutory authorities, parents, school communities and other stakeholders has increased significantly, and so has the complexity of issues school leaders must contend with.

Research has also identified several factors that have contributed to the role becoming increasingly less attractive to aspirant principals. These include a lack of understanding about the varied and complex aspects of a principal's job;

the perception that school leadership is 'inherited'; the difficulty of transition from classroom teacher to principal; a lack of clear pathways for career progression; a disparity between the very high levels of responsibility and financial remuneration; and considerable variability among principal preparation programs. These issues are particularly challenging for beginning principals, who are unlikely to be successful without proper preparation and support. Indeed, the low quality and inadequacy of principal preparation is cited as one of the major contributing factors to declining principal applicant pools.

Australia's educational system, where principal preparation is described as ad hoc and disconnected, is not exempt from this global challenge (AITSL, 2015). Immediately prior to the release of the AITSL standards, Wildy et al. (2010) reported no evidence of any state or territory in Australia implementing or even proposing preparation programs for principals prior to appointment. Just five years later, Australia made significant gains in principal preparation, with the emergence of 10 programs designed specifically to prepare principals for the role. However, there is uncertainty about the effectiveness of these programs and how to measure their impact upon the quality of principal leadership (Watterston, 2015).

The development of pathways and preparation of aspirants is only part of the issue in Australia. There needs to be a greater focus on the early

identification of talent and avenues for aspirants to engage in these programs. This highlights the importance of the role of existing principals to identify, recommend and support potential aspirants to access preparation programs.

This global challenge is not a new phenomenon to Queensland. A study of 585 Queensland principals in 2001 found that one Department of Education region experienced a principal turnover of 45% within a 12-month period, with 30% of these principals requesting a return to the classroom. A lack of preparation was cited as a significant contributing factor to this turnover, given that not one of these principals had engaged in any formal preparation for the role (Lester, 2001).

In recent years, there has been increasing attention paid by researchers to what is occurring internationally with respect to principal preparation. The International Study of the Preparation of Principals (ISPP) is one such example. The ISPP represents almost a decade of research across 14 countries. Through the central research question, *'To what extent do principals perceive their preparation to align with their professional needs in their year of appointment?'* the ISPP has made a significant contribution to research on best practice for principal preparation from a global perspective. Further, the ISPP identified that in spite of differences in principal preparation and professional contexts, the basic work of beginning principals and their

challenges tends to be remarkably similar. This finding is reinforced by the Teaching and Learning International Survey, conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2014), which presented a common set of professional practices for principals across 34 countries, including Australia, Denmark, Israel, Japan and Singapore.

Research that has emerged from the ISPP has identified that principals must be leaders and managers, therefore, principal preparation programs must provide school leaders with the skills needed to direct (that is, manage, supervise, ensure standards are met, develop projects, plan and administer) and lead (that is, empower others, negotiate, and motivate members of the educational community). This is described as developing leadership acumen, or the keen understanding of the social, political and relational dimensions within educational leadership. While findings from the ISPP have cautioned against creating a 'template' of principal preparation, it is identified that principals do require certain attributes to be successful in their role. At the same time, principals must know how to adapt these attributes to the unique context of each school they lead.

An important research outcome to emerge from the ISPP, are five principles proposed by Webber and Scott (2013) to guide the design of principal preparation programs. These are orientated

around a central focus of principled leadership identity. The first, *Principal as professional*, requires that programs clearly develop principal capability to not only articulate the educational and human values that underpin their individual practices, but lead the pedagogical practices within their schools.

The second principle, *Formal, informal and experiential leadership development*, calls for a varied yet balanced approach to principal preparation programs. Programs must overtly integrate adult learning principles, including a strong focus on personal responsibility for learning, and provide opportunities to

connect theory and practice. Programs must also focus on building principal capacity to develop constructive and intentional relationships. This is defined by the third principle, *Relationships and allegiances*.

Clarke and Wildy (2013) contend that principals must be able to navigate school systems. The fourth principle, *Entrepreneurship, power and accountability*, addresses this, by highlighting the opportunity for programs to develop 'renaissance educational leaders'. These are leaders who are resilient, highly adaptable to change, able to anticipate changes in the educational setting, have highly developed human and



social resource management skills, and are open to non-traditional forms of leadership (Webber & Scott, 2013). These skills will enable principals to be creative and innovative in their approach to challenges they face as leaders.

Finally, the fifth principle, *Self-care and wellbeing*, maintains that principal preparation must include development of the capacity for self-reflection, to assist in the identification and management of stress. This final principle is essential given that tension and transformation are major elements of beginning principals' careers (Magee & Slater, 2013). If leaders are not sufficiently resilient or healthy (both physically and mentally), they will be unproductive in engaging with the other four principles.

While Webber and Scott's (2013) five principles provide a general framework for program design, Magee and Slater (2013) argue that any principal preparation program must be long-term, include sustained coaching and mentoring, and engage aspirants in professional learning communities.

It is evident that there is progress in Queensland towards greater principal preparation and readiness to lead, however there continues to be a need to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs and build the capability of existing principals to identify and support aspirant leaders. The five principles proposed by Webber and Scott, along with The Australian Professional Standards for Principals

and Leadership Profiles, form an effective starting point for existing principals to not only develop their own pathways for development, but to guide developmental pathways for aspirants. If we are to overcome the growing global shortage of suitable principal candidates and build retention of existing principals, then principal preparation is also a critical agenda for educational systems.

TREVOR BUCHANAN is a QASSP 2020 Travelling Scholar; his project title is 'Principals Developing Principals'. He will travel to Estonia, rated fourth in the OECD for principal preparation, and Stanford University in California, to investigate how systems and individual principals identify, encourage and develop school leaders for the future. Trevor has been a participant in QASSP's 'Practitioner Research for School Leaders' program and has commenced a Doctor of Education degree at CQ University.

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