

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING: UNDERSTANDING THE EXTENT AND VALUE

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ABSTRACT

Relationship building in the remote rural settings studied occurred at various levels: professional, school-based, personal, and community-wide. Principals and teachers who understand the importance of relationship building – especially its personal and community-wide facets – who take the initiative in establishing and nurturing relationships and improving them through reflection over time, are more successful at motivating, inspiring, and aligning country people to facilitate change. The acquisition of supportive relationships is presented as a possible precursor to successful school leadership and teaching in small remote rural school settings.

INTRODUCTION

This study was prompted by an interest in determining why some principals and teachers were successful in leading their rural schools while others were not. It became evident, as a previous principal and resident of a remote rural environment that the context either enhanced or hindered the way principals and teachers practiced. The study investigated, from a symbolic interactionist perspective (Woods, 1992), how 12 principals and teachers made meaning of their role, and why influences upon their practice and their reactions to these influences resulted in different practice outcomes.

Being mindful of the fact that a number of countries including Canada, New Zealand, Scotland, Finland, Ireland, the United States and Australia have numerous schools in rural setting, and in some countries up to 30% of all primary aged children attend these schools, the findings of this study is important. Literature has revealed reports of work-related stress that reduces the quality of performance and hence the quality of education. It has described situations that led to principals and teachers resigning from the profession or transferring back to urban classrooms. However, these reports appear to lack information explaining the impact that the role and the school context have upon the principals and teachers' ability to develop and sustain leadership in remote rural schools. It is argued that the study will provide information to afford a clearer understanding of principal and teacher leadership – what principals and teachers are likely to experience as they seek leadership opportunities. And what factors may influence practice. The factors that influence practice could include demands made by employing authorities and the local community, teaching a wide range of ages and abilities in the one class, and understanding the role of the principal and the teacher in a small community.

The emerging theory generated will extend current leadership theory as well as providing a rationale to enable employers to improve support offered to teaching staff of rural schools. This has the potential to improve the retention rate of principals and teachers in rural environments and the quality of education provided to rural children.

PARTICIPANTS

The type of sampling used in this study was purposive. Education Queensland Executive Directors were consulted to nominate possible candidates. The 12 candidates selected fulfilled the following criteria: their schools were in rural locations and the recommended principals and teachers were articulate and clear thinkers. They were full-time staff members of their schools with full responsibility for teaching their students and responsible for the organisation and management of their schools.

This purposive sample was not intended to reflect the stakeholder population demographically. However, the final sample included a cross-section of participants from different rural settings, primary and secondary, as well as different years of teaching experience, gender and the number of students enrolled at their schools.

METHOD: THE PRINCIPAL AND TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Three interviews held on-site, each 45 minutes long, recorded and transcripts given to the participant to check. Mind maps were developed and altered by the participants during and between interviews to ensure their voice were heard.

Examples of questions during the interviews are: How important is it to know the educational expectations of the local community? Explain why and provide examples. Did you ever feel part of community? How? Why? Provide examples. How does the school fit into the local community? Explain and provide examples. Describe how you felt as a new teacher/principal during your first months at the school and compare with how you feel now.

Using the factors discussed by the participants and through constant comparison, concepts emerged and contributed to the development of a number of theoretical propositions. It was proposed that good multiage teaching enables the process of parent and community acceptance to begin. In addition, it was suggested that developing positive relationships with community members and involvement in community activities enables trust and respect between principal and community members to be established. The acceptance and sharing of ideas resulting from this respect and trust enabled the principal to introduce unfamiliar concepts and have them accepted.

These propositions are now integrated into the synthesis of findings, highlighting implications for leadership researchers and policy makers, and outlining the lessons that can be learned with the ultimate aim of developing an awareness of the complexity of the leadership practice of principals and teachers in rural settings

WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCE THE PRACTICE OF PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS?

Much of the literature concerned with principals and teachers in small schools concentrates upon how the many tasks involved influence their daily lives. A number of studies (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Dunning, 1993; Lester, 2003; Mason, 1999; Nolan, 1998; Wilson & McPake, 1998) influenced the way the present research proceeded and, in turn, now contribute to the analysis of the themes drawn from the data. The leadership research, mostly based in large urban schools, describes the changing patterns of leadership from leader/follower to a more distributive approach encouraging teachers to be involved in decision making and to grow professionally through the experience. Some of this research (Day et al., 2000; Fullan, 2000; Glatter et al., 1996; Leithwood et al., 1999; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Lyman, 2000; Rolph, 2004; Sergiovanni, 2001; Walker & Quong, 2004) contributed to the present research design and consequently adds to its data analysis.

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CORROBORATION AND CHALLENGES TO SOME EXISTING ASSUMPTIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF THE LITERATURE

The factors and consequences outlined in the following section list those that not only were findings from this study but have also been reported in previous studies, both international and Australian. Corroboration of the literature is an appropriate point to begin this summary of the findings of this study and its implications.

Demands of employing authorities

The findings from research projects conducted by Fullan et al. (2000) and Glatter et al. (1996) indicate that the requirements of employing authorities, which are many in number, alter on a regular basis, require specialist knowledge to fulfil, and impose serious demands upon principals and teachers. Additionally, the demands of school administration are increasing and effective school leadership can be, and is, dampened if administrative matters dominate the principal's daily activities. The findings from principal and teacher research projects conducted by Clarke and Wildy (2004), Lester (2003) and Wilson and McPake (1998) in rural settings, highlight the multifaceted and often irresolvable consequences of the complex school position that principals and teachers are required to fulfil. Fitting the multiplicity of tasks into a principal and teacher's day and being able to comply with the ever increasing employing body's demands, were highlighted by Dunning (1993) and Mason (1999), who also noted the resulting adverse effect upon principal and teacher job satisfaction. Loss of job satisfaction, disillusionment and finally, transfer from the position, are themes noted in many of the studies.

The findings from the study reported here reflect precisely these effects. The ever increasing demands of the employer for policies, action plans, and annual reports can, and do dominate the busy lives of a principal and teacher with a full-time teaching load. Not only the demands of the employer were recorded, but additionally, the findings uncovered the community's expectations of the principal and teacher. Demands from the employer and the community must be addressed by the principal and teacher and this imposes burdens that constrain leadership possibilities.

Complexity of multi-age teaching

Anderson and Pavan, (1993), Bingham (1992), Dean (1988), Gaustad, (1992) and Lester (2003) have all reported the complexity of multiage teaching, which the findings of this study support. The present study revealed that community members had high expectations for the academic outcomes of their multiage school. Principals and teachers with prior practical knowledge of multiage teaching and organisation adjusted to the demands of the small school classroom rapidly, whereas those without these capabilities struggled to fulfil both community and their employing authority's demands. It seems that a priority requirement of the position should be competency in multiple ability multiage teaching.

Meeting the community's educational expectations

As Christie and Lingard (2001) report, tensions can occur between principal, teachers and the school community if educational expectations are not met. The data from this study support their findings. Additionally, the present findings indicate that the principal and teacher should work alongside the community to meet the educational needs of the community and to offer the best possible educational experiences to the children. The findings appeared to indicate that, through the process of working

together for improved educational outcomes, mutual trust and respect develop between the principal, teachers and community members. This facilitates acceptance of the principal as 'the community's principal' and the teacher as 'the community's teacher', which in turn enables the principal to introduce strategic planning options that could increase school outcomes. Mutual trust and respect appear to be factors that enhance principals and teachership. Without the development of trust and respect, it appears that the principal remains as 'the new principal' and the teacher, 'the new teacher' and hence his/her innovations will not be endorsed by the community. The consequence is that they will not be implemented.

Sensitivity to context

This study found that the part-time staff members in rural schools have a deep-seated need to be involved in decision making, and to be kept fully informed of any employer directives. More importantly, it appears that the members of the community – with or without children at the school – expect to be involved in the decision-making process. Principals and teachers who recognised this community expectation and responded accordingly appeared to be able to offer strategic planning ideas, to build vision and have these accepted, but those who did not recognise or rejected community expectations experienced limited or no acceptance of their ideas.

Building personal networks

Personal network building has been recognised as an important step in ensuring that the principal's perspective of the school is conveyed directly to community members (Fullan et al., 2002; Gammage, 1998; Lester, 2003). This networking also provides a valuable source of information about community members, their status within the community, and their influence upon community affairs. This study would tend to agree with Fullan and the other researchers above, regarding the importance of developing personal networks through participation in social and sporting clubs and attendance at local events. Furthermore, this study found that networking facilitated the establishment of positive relationships with members of the community and subsequently brought rewards in the form of enhanced community support for the principal and teacher. These rewards include mutual respect and trust that appears to optimise possibilities for principal and teacher leadership. Closing out links with a community proved to stall interaction, and principals and teachers faltered.

The ability to develop relationships with a wide variety of people appears to require skills of a principal and teacher not identified in job descriptions published by Education Queensland (Education Queensland, 2002). Education Queensland detailed necessary criteria for the position to include '... working with staff and parents ...' (p. 3). A high level of confidence referred to as 'emotional intelligence' by Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002) also appears to be necessary, especially considering the dislocation of these principals and teachers from family, friends and

their established networks of colleagues. It appears the job description may require review.

The school's place in the community

The findings of Gammage (1998) and Clarke (2003) characterise the remote rural school as the hub or centre of the local community. Having a school within a remote rural environment brings increased resources that otherwise would not be normally present, such as office equipment, meeting space, sporting equipment and facilities and the like. Being thus positioned, the school can encourage the broader community to become involved in all school events and to take an interest in the children's learning. In this sense, at least, the principal and teacher seem to be placed in a 'central' position in the community. Nevertheless, the findings of the present study highlight a different perception of the school and its principal inasmuch as the school is seen as part of, but not the centre of, the community, and the principal and teacher is 'judged' by how well s/he also becomes part of the community. Members of rural communities hold power within the community and in all its organisations, including the school. However, no matter how well established (and accepted) the principal and teacher becomes, s/he does not assume the central role implied by Gammage and Clarke. On the contrary, even after the principal and teacher have been invited to lead community functions—a strong marker of community acceptance—s/he remains just a member of the community, not a central or pivotal person. Moreover, it is still the community that holds the power over school affairs: community members can remove support for the school at any time.

The focus of school leadership

A review of the studies of large urban schools conducted by researchers such as Leithwood et al. (1999), Leithwood and Riehl (2004) and Lyman (2000) has indicated that the principal leads within the school and delegates only within the school. The principal, whether acting according to the leader/follower role or the distributive leadership role, still has jurisdiction within the school as long as the employer's requirements are fulfilled. This is clearly contrary to the findings of this study, because a community has the power to withdraw or endorse support for the principal. If the principal and teacher are endorsed, support appears to be unlimited for his/her ideas, programmes and policies. In cases where community support is not forthcoming, enrolments fall and the principal may be excluded socially. Though the study sample is small, the abovementioned factors have such broad implications that they should not be discounted.

Relationship building

Leadership theory, dominated by findings from research conducted in large urban schools, has offered a number of possibilities to guide the understanding of principal and teacher leadership in remote rural schools. Within schools, issues such as working with and developing the professional skills of the teachers (including representatives of the parent body on school committees) appear to dominate large

school leadership theories. Relationship building has been noted as important by some researchers (Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves, 2003), but their analyses have focused mainly upon relationships between students, staff and parents within the school context. Relationships are significant in both leadership theory and effective leadership research and this was a finding of this study. The difference appears to be that the within-school context dominates the focus of relationship building in larger urban schools whereas the whole context—within and outside schools—is of importance for leadership in rural schools. Furthermore, relationship building may be an important precursor to success, because key stakeholders can withdraw their support and thereby block innovation.

If a principal and teacher apply a collaborative approach not only to part-time staff but to community members, success is possible. In addition, the present findings imply that the establishment of connections and trust with members of the community as well as with staff is the basis upon which this collaborative approach is built. The community members see themselves as 'persons of influence' and appear to expect to work along with the principal and teacher. A collaborative approach involving principal, part-time staff and community members appears to be pivotal to the success of a principal and teacher in a remote, rural setting.

Further to the above point, one interpretation of the present findings suggests extended devolution of leadership, not only to teaching staff as assumed by most leadership theories but also to community members. A principal and teacher who develops trust and connectedness with community members can share parts of the leadership role with those members. This role sharing appears to be 'fluid'. Depending upon the focus of school planning, the membership of specific committees is dependent upon member skills and degree of interest. The membership of the principal and teacher is a constant on all planning committees. This finding reveals the significance of community engagement and involvement. It may be said that it is 'just' the stakeholders who differ: in an urban context it is the principal, full-time staff and community members; in a remote rural context it is the principal, part-time staff and community members. Seemingly there is no difference but my findings suggest that there is a qualitative difference.

The stakeholders of rural settings 'see' the community as 'their' community and the school as 'their' school. They take ownership of its success. Their interest, loyalty and commitment to 'their' school is high: they take the principal into their homes and their lives. This is a critical factor in remote, rural settings and may also be found to be critical in other settings where the stakeholders have strong links with each other outside of the school and where the school is viewed as an integral part of 'their' community. An understanding and acceptance that the community exerts a major influence on school affairs is essential. The recognition of this factor by the principal and teacher appears to be an attribute that is necessary for his/her success.

The remote, rural setting demands of the principal and teacher, the inclusion of this wider group of participants. Successful leadership attributes do differ as a

consequence. The principal and teacher in a remote, rural context are conspicuous, visible and vulnerable. And to be 'seen' as a school and a community leader, the principal and teacher have to have or has to develop the capacity to handle this visibility. Visibility is handled through the development of relationships. The ability to develop relationships in this setting calls for skills of a high degree. The principal as the school leader has to open the school to all, link with community expectations, engage all interested community members, and tap into existing community networks. The life of a principal and teacher is not his/her own. They become the 'talk' of the community. The need to develop relationships, both public and personal, is significant.

These findings expand the knowledge of remote rural school principal and teacher practice and offer directions for further research into school leadership. When considered in conjunction with previously recorded findings, a clearer picture of practice in this context emerges. With this in mind, the following section details two pathways that appear to be possible in principal and teacher leadership.

FINDINGS: DO SOME PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS THRIVE IN THEIR POSITIONS, WHILE OTHERS FALTER?

The principals and teachers' stories recorded operational conflict, rapid knowledge acquisition, despair, acceptance and collaboration as important influences on their integration into community culture. At the risk of over-simplification, it seems that success in a remote school is dependent on the principal and teacher's initial orientation to the role and the community context in which the position is embedded. This is diagrammatically represented in Figures 1 and 2. The figures present pathways towards or away from school and community leadership. The ability to negotiate the pathway is influenced by the knowledge acquired before accepting the position and early in the principalship. An acceptance or lack of acceptance of the principal by the community ultimately enhances or limits leadership.

I learnt about teaching in a small school from the staff in my second urban posting, but it was all wrong. This rural school community is so different from what I heard about school communities in the urban school staff room. Sue, Interview 2

Both figures begin with assumptions about the knowledge a beginning principal and teacher may acquire before starting at the post. It is the action of the principal and teacher and the following interaction between principal and community that shape further understandings and subsequent leadership possibilities.

I am not accepted by the community, they keep telling me what to do and I do not want to do what they tell me so we are at logger heads. Jo Interview 1

Figure 1 suggests the pathway for a successful principal and teacher in a remote, rural context. Figure 2 illustrates the pathway of an unsuccessful principal and teacher.

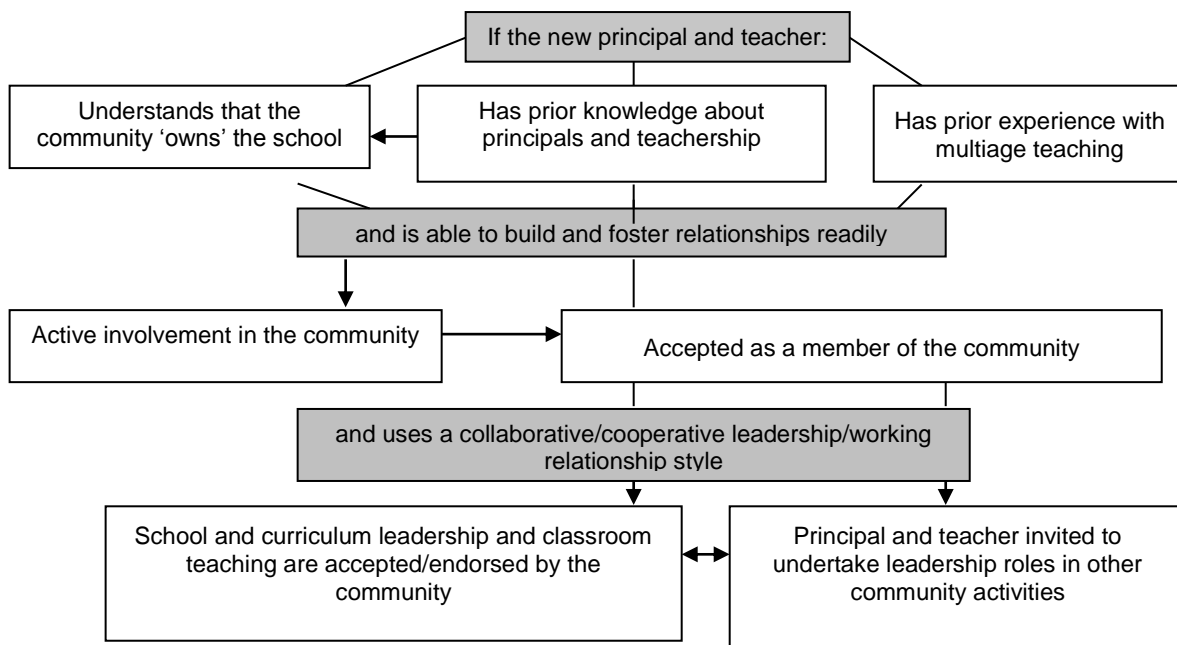


Figure 1: Successful principal and teacher leadership

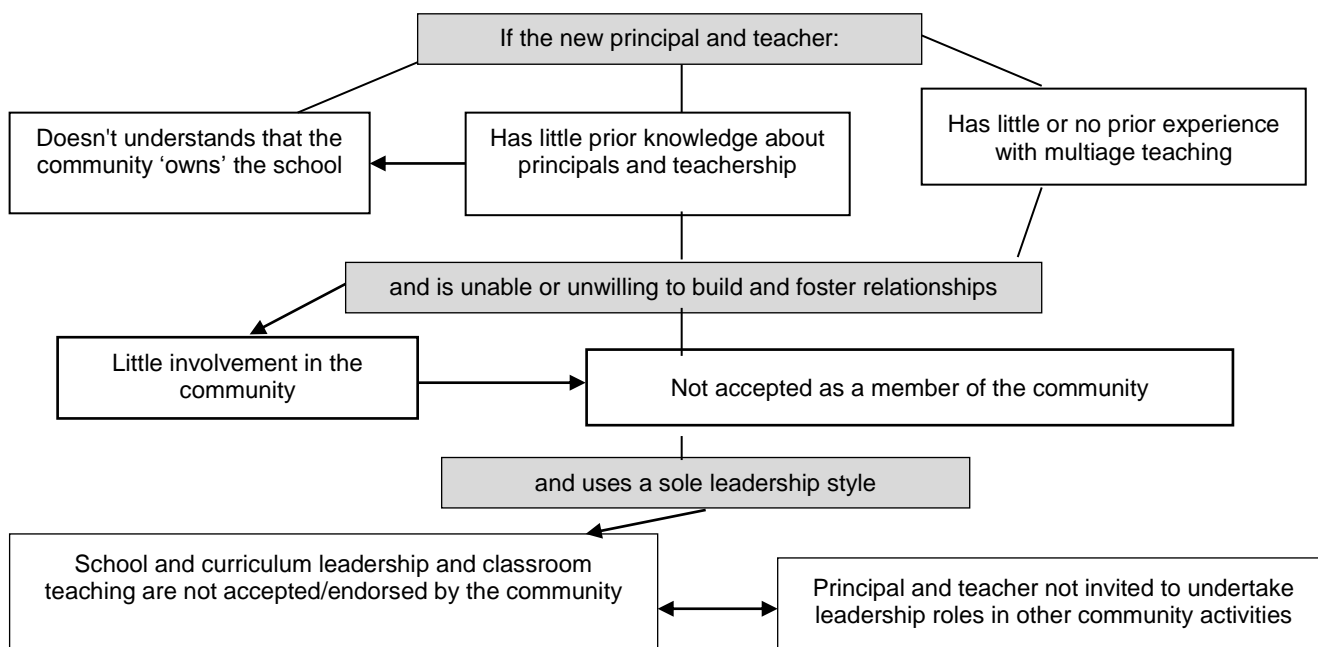


Figure 2 – Unsuccessful principal and teacher leadership

Although the evidence from this study is not sufficient to generalise strongly, nevertheless it is proposed that the centrality of community acceptance and the importance of relationship building are key factors in principal and teacher leadership success. Principals and teachers who assume that they can work in isolation from the community—perhaps because they are the (sole) educational

professional present—are very unlikely to succeed with anything more than a placeholder role, perhaps not even that. An individualistic approach tends to produce direct action towards management and maintenance of the status quo.

I work alone. The P&C makes suggestions but I decide. They do not like it but I am the educational expert. Bill Interview 2

By contrast, principals and teachers who presuppose that they need to integrate into their community and carefully nurture relationships are much more likely to succeed, not only in their everyday teaching and learning activities, but also in their role as leader of school development. A collaborative approach tends to direct action towards the future—to improvement and therefore change.

I am invited everywhere to be part of everything: arts council, progress committee – I feel so comfort and whenever I need assist at school everyone offers to help along. Alex Interview 3

I have only learnt this since being here but it is so important to not only get to know the members of the local community but to nurture relationships with staff and the community members. Cheryl Interview 3

This finding accommodates existing theory, but draws attention to the under-researched processes of relationship building that allow a principal and teacher to become a bona fide member of the school community.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FINDINGS

The local community perceives the school as a significant part of their community and consequently expects involvement in all school decision-making processes. Indeed, it is difficult if not impossible, for a principal and teacher to make any worthwhile changes without community support. The key point is that any change (other than trivial) requires community approval and involvement, and that in turn requires principal and teacher initiative and leadership. In other words, even the everyday basic of teaching improvement requires the exercise of leadership, quite unlike the self-contained classroom of an urban school. This is different from large urban schools where the community has little influence on school activities, other than through the Parents and Citizens' Committee or School Council.

I find it best to keep the P&C fully informed of all my plans and to even let them know what could be possible. We work together well and they have really good ideas and suggestions. Chris Interview 2

At one level, this difference is stark and of immense practical significance, as will be reiterated later. At another theoretical level, a central issue is the nature of the process of relationship building needed to achieve effective leadership in remote as opposed to urban schools. In remote rural settings, much depends on the principal and teacher's acceptance as a member of the community, which in turn means that relationship building has to be personal in focus and embedded in a wide range of community activities beyond the school. In the urban setting, conversely, the focus of a collaborative/transformational principal is mostly on the staff (and to a lesser

extent the students and parents) of the school. Such relationships are mostly 'professional' in character, that is, school focused and more reliant on the principal's professional standing within (and beyond) the school than on the principal's personal relationships with members of the wider community. Arguably, therefore, not only the *focus* of relationship building, but also its *nature*, differ between the remote rural and urban settings. At the very least, this implies that staff development for shared/ transformational leadership has to be adjusted for the context within which the leadership is to occur. Furthermore, it is possible that theories of group/distributive/collaborative leadership will have to be amended to accommodate the findings reported here.

It is argued that appropriate relationship building is more central to the development of shared/group leadership than has been previously acknowledged. It is accepted that relationship building is present in urban as well as rural contexts, but the focus and character of the relationships vary. Within both urban and rural settings, relationship building is professional, school-based, personal and community-wide. But the focus differs between the two settings: the urban setting tends to be dominated by professional and school-based relationships, while the rural setting is dominated by personal and community-wide relationships. It is through these relationships that leadership becomes possible. How principals and teachers in urban schools gain acceptance for themselves, their ideas and for their approaches to leadership and organisational development have been recorded by researchers as chiefly centred on pedagogy, knowledge of current educational trends and encouragement of staff professional development (Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves, 2003). These are firmly centred upon professional and school-based elements. The present study's data indicate that at the heart of a principal and teacher's leadership is the critical 'organisation' – the local community. Personal and community-wide relationships are central to gaining the acceptance that allows the possibility of leadership. It is only through these relationships that the principal and teacher becomes accepted as the community's principal and community's teacher – 'their principal', 'their teacher' – thereby creating the circumstances necessary before altering established practices and updating the school's vision.

I really feel part of the community. When I started here I was an outsider but as we began to work together I began to feel comfort and a part of things. I recently overheard someone say 'He is our teacher'. Jeff Interview 3

However, there are numerous issues in large schools, so the degree of importance attached to developing positive relationships with all community members is masked or attenuated, and thus has not been recorded as important as in the remote rural setting. It is possible that the 'hermetically sealed' environment of the urban school may potentiate (but not mandate) 'command' styles of leadership, whereas the remote rural school virtually mandates collaborative leadership. Through successful relationship building and acceptance of a community-influenced role, principals and teachers connect with their communities and have the potential to position their communities for change – in both curriculum (within-school) and community development (outside-school) through collaborative leadership.

The differences in relationship building between rural and urban contexts are not as important as their role of precursor to, or catalyst of, collaborative leadership. Collaborative leadership is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collaboratively. It involves opportunities to bring to the surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information and assumptions through continuing conversations; to inquire about and generate ideas together; to reflect upon and make sense of work in light of shared beliefs and new information. This approach creates actions that emerge from these new understandings—such is the core of successful principal and teachership in rural settings.

Is relationship building a precursor to collaborative leadership?

If my theoretical interpretation is a reasonable starting point, it should be possible to obtain more evidence of the importance of relational knowledge and how this facilitates ‘leadership through relationships’ in the development of all school leaders. It should also be possible to extend my findings by showing that ‘leadership through relationships’ is a precursor to, and a critical element of, collaborative leadership. For example, does leadership in a remote school community facilitate leadership in urban schools (as sheer experience might imply), and if so how much of that benefit can be attributed to the relational knowledge and dispositions acquired in the rural context? Might there be some disadvantages of this kind of prior experience? For example, in a different context, relying on community support may be detrimental for leadership.

CONCLUSION

When considering a research process to adequately investigate the complex role of principal and teacher leadership in remote rural schools, symbolic interactionism as a methodological framework offered the best avenue to ensure the voices of the participants were recorded. Empirical knowledge gained through living in a remote rural area and leading rural schools and communities influenced this decision. This methodological framework provided the background to analyses of the stories principals told, shedding light on how principals and teachers make meaning of their leadership practice, through the investigation of influences on that practice.

Prevailing theories of leadership need to be used to further explore the relational aspects on school leadership. Have we underestimated the importance of relational knowledge and how to develop relationships as a precursor to leadership? Employing bodies, in identifying candidates for principalship, may benefit from the information within this thesis. Similarly, if communities set predetermined roles and expectations for incoming principals and teachers explicitly or implicitly, then there are understandings that need to be in place to help scaffold principal and teacher success.

Remote rural principal and teacher leadership is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collaboratively with community members. Conflicts and collaborations with community members produce consequences for principals and teachers. In essence, the ability of individuals to build relationships is a definitive factor in determining the success or failure of school leaders in remote, rural schools.

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