

RESEARCHING IN SMALL SCHOOLS - RESULTS AND CHALLENGES

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INTRODUCTION

In a previous issue of *Education in Rural Australia*, I described my research experiences in an article entitled, *Personal Reflections on Researching in Small Schools*. This paper reiterates the research context and the purpose of the research, outlines the major findings, provides an analysis of the results and identifies some challenges and appropriate actions central to the successful implementation of change in one teacher schools.

CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

The Scott Reports (1989, 1990), which terminated an era in New South Wales State Education and introduced a new one, provide an appropriate watershed, fulcrum or opportunity to separate and examine official policy implementation approaches used to effect change in one teacher schools. Three sets of interviews were conducted in the North West Region of new South Wales - pre Scott (1989,1990); post Scott 1 (June/July 1992); and post Scott 2 (June/July 1993).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the approach to change employed by Regional office personnel and field officers of the North West Region implementing Departmentally prescribed changes in one-teacher schools over a period of significant structural upheaval within the New South Wales state education system.

Three separate samples of personnel in the North West Region of the NSW Department of School Education were involved in each of the three series of interviews.

- (a) Regional office personnel as the initiator or implementor of change directives in one-teacher schools;
- (b) field office personnel (district inspectors and cluster directors) who were responsible for one-teacher schools; and
- (c) the teachers-in-charge/principals of the one-teacher schools.

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Analysis of the core questions of the interviews revealed a significant change in the **approach to change** employed by senior management of the North West Region of the Department to implement Departmental policy changes in one-teacher schools. In the period pre-Scott the **approach to change** was generally authoritarian, whereby the teachers-in-charge were instructed by their superiors to bring about the change within a short set time period. Data from the second interview, post-Scott 1, indicated a shift in the **approach to change**, which concentrated upon training of principals, with help provided by senior management over an extended time period. The final period, post-Scott 2, once again saw a significant change in the **approach to change**, which consisted of involvement of the principals in the process of implementation with senior management taking on a facilitating role.

The supplementary questions provided a wealth of interesting data and information. The Regional office personnel, field officers and principals perceived the methods used to implement change in small schools were effective for the three time periods – pre-Scott, post-Scott 1 and post-Scott 2. This reflected changes in organisational structure as well as changes to the roles and responsibilities of those interviewed. Data showed that the main perceived problems

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associated with getting one-teacher schools to change were the **conservative nature of small school communities, the magnitude of the principals' task, isolation and the lack of professional interaction**. The climate towards changes was viewed as increasingly positive from the first interview to the third interview and centred upon the positive aspects of **acceptance of the changing Australian environment and the positive attitude of principals**. Negative responses included the **hierarchical structure and the lack of demand for change** in the first interview to the **need for consolidation** – the recognition that there was too much change in the third interview.

Data gathered on contact between senior management revealed an almost complete lack of contact with Head Office executive, increased contact with field officers over the five years of the longitudinal study and seemingly no change with regard to the contact with Regional office personnel.

Responses to the open ended question resulted in a wide variety of topics discussed with the problems of **small schools, the change process, the changing role of the principal** and the **nature of small schools** being most prevalent.

The identified problems tended to vary with the nature of the change although the most prevalent included the conservative nature of small school communities, different priorities of the principal and the Region, lack of time to implement the changes and communications breakdown.

ANALYSIS OF THE APPROACH TO CHANGE

An analysis of the approach to change was facilitated through the four concepts of maturity, delegation, style of change management and the scope of the change.

The concept of maturity was outlined by Argyris (1957:49-51) in which he identified seven behavioural changes from childhood to adulthood. Hersey and Blanchard (1972:134, 135) outlined a "Life Cycle Theory of Leadership" which illustrated the relationship between an effective style of leadership and the maturity of a group. They viewed the maturity concept used in the Life Cycle Theory as consistent with Argyris's Immaturity – Maturity Continuum with two main differences: (1) they applied maturity in terms of psychological age, not chronological age, and (2) they extended the maturity concept from an individual to a group.

Carey (1988:22) defined a mature group as "one that was capable of working cohesively towards achieving goals which they had set and upon which a form of consensus had been reached".

The implication for practice is that the approach to change employed to implement imposed change in one-teacher schools needs to be flexible to cater for the changing environment and different expectations, roles and abilities of the personnel. The approach also needs to accurately reflect the maturity of the relationship between the superordinates and subordinates. It could be said that this is *situational*, similar to the concept of situational leadership as postulated by Hersey and Blanchard (1972).

They suggested the appropriate leadership style of a group should change from authoritarian to more democratic and be linked to the maturity of the group. Thus parallels may be drawn between the situational approach to change as the author is suggesting and Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership style.

While Hersey and Blanchard concentrated upon maturity within a group, Whitaker (1993) developed the closely allied theme of delegation. Whitaker (1993:139-142) referred to the "process of management involved in delegation" and suggested that in successful organisations

responsibilities are spread through all levels. He identified the sequence of management delegation as a continuum. This is represented in Table 1 below.

DEPENDENCE	INTERDEPENDENCE	INDEPENDENCE
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Table 1: Management Delegation Continuum

Whitaker (1993:140)

Dependence typically occurs according to Whitaker (1993) when people are new in a job or the job was a developmental one. Interdependence refers to the relationship between the manager and subordinate when "both are partners in a job or task". Independence occurs when there is a capability of the subordinate to self manage.

The two concepts of style of change management and the scope of change as developed by Dunphy and Stace (1992) were outlined. Leadership style was seen as participative (collaborative and consultative) or non-participative (directive and coercive). The scale of change ranged from incremental (fine tuning and incremental adjustment) to transformative (modular transformation and corporate transformation).

Thus, in terms of the four concepts of maturity, delegation, style of change management and scope of change, *the approach to change* in the three time periods pre-Scott (1989, 1990), post-Scott 1 (June/July 1992) and post-Scott 2 (June/July 1993) may be represented by Table 2 below.

	MATURITY	DELEGATION	STYLE OF CHANGE MANAGEMENT	SCOPE OF CHANGE
PRE-SCOTT (1989, 1990)	IMMATURE	DEPENDENT	NON-PARTICIPATIVE COERCIVE	INCREMENTALIST
POST-SCOTT 1 (1992)	INCREASED MATURITY	INTERDEPENDENT	PARTICIPATIVE CONSULTATIVE	TRANSFORMATIVE
POST-SCOTT 2 (1993)	MATURE	INDEPENDENT	PARTICIPATIVE COLLABORATIVE	INCREMENTALIST

Table 2: Approach to Change - Analysis

This represents evidence of increased maturity, increased delegation, a more participative style of change management and a change in the scope of change from incrementalist through transformative and back to incrementalist.

The relationship of the Regional office personnel, field officers and principals changed dramatically over the period. Pre-Scott, the one-teacher schools were staffed by teachers-in-charge and, as such, were not recognised as principals. They were considered to be teachers on the staff of a multi-campus school with the district inspector as principal of the schools. Post-Scott 1 resulted in the teachers-in-charge being replaced through the merit selection process by newly appointed principals with all the status and responsibilities of principals. The newly appointed principals were typically older, more experienced and sure of themselves. The salaries offered to P6 principals were raised to close on \$50,000 with allowances and so P6 schools became more attractive propositions.

At the same time the district inspectors' positions were all re-advertised and replaced with cluster directors, whose traditional inspectorial role was deleted from their responsibilities. Their role was more that of support and assistance. The concept of "turning the organisation downside-up" (Scott, 1990) was consistent with the principals' beliefs, as they were, in the main, very happy to manage their own schools. The establishment of School Councils once again gave principals more power in the relationship with their traditional superordinates. The School Councils were

established to run the school and make decisions. School Councils took this power seriously. The concept of self-managing schools and the catchcry "Let the managers manage" had been taken to heart. This led to a breakdown of the traditional subordinate and superordinate roles and was, generally, replaced with the concept of shared decision-making. This was reflected in the involvement of principals in managing the cluster together with the cluster director. At these cluster management meetings, whilst the cluster director chaired the meetings he or she was only one voice within the group. Thus the traditional subordinate/superordinate roles of field officers (cluster directors) and principals.

These factors were evident in the approach to change post-Scott 2 (1993). A shared management style was the approach, but another aspect was emerging. principals, as the adopters of change, had taken the concept of self-managing schools seriously and were exerting their new-found independence and addressing the challenges of the increased responsibilities. A potent marriage took place, consisting of community members, who formed the School Councils, and the principals. These two partners, in the main, responded positively to their increased decision-making powers and seized the opportunity to make a reality of the concept of the self-managing school. Scott's vision to turn the organisation "downside-up" and so make the school the centre was consistent with what the community and the principals of small schools had always thought – i.e. the schools were the focus for education and the Education Department was there to support the school, not to interfere with its functioning.

As Chandler (1991:22, 23) stated, "the challenge of the Scott Report (June 1989) was essentially the challenge of creating a system of self-managing schools ...".

Thus, to the one-teacher school communities and to the principals, the idea of a self-managing school was consistent with the way they felt about "their" school all along. It had always been "their school" and they were vitally and intimately involved in how it was managed and what change took place.

School Councils of one-teacher schools and the principals were indeed most willing to manage their own schools and this meant the approaches to change appropriate for this time needed to recognise the increased maturity, independence and willingness of the principals to manage their own schools.

In April 1993 Scott published his own review of progress in the implementation of his recommendations of 1989 and 1990 (Scott, 1989, 1990). Whilst recognising some delays he stated that the Minister's External Council of Review (of which he was chairperson) had reported significant progress in each of its two reports.

He stated:

During the second and third years of implementation there has been increasingly strong evidence of greater commitment, more innovation, and rising enthusiasm for school-based management approaches (Scott, 1993:27).

He concluded

... an enormous amount has been achieved in less than three years, and essentially the five-year implementation program is on track.

CHALLENGES CENTRAL TO IMPLEMENTING CHANGE IN ONE-TEACHER SCHOOLS

A number of challenges were identified as central to the implementation of change in one-teacher schools. The data identified the conservative nature of small school communities, the magnitude of the teaching principal task, isolation and the resultant lack of professional dialogue as being important.

The implications for practice are that actions need to be taken in order to attempt to overcome the problems. Table 3 summarises some possible actions and resultant benefits.

Identified Challenges	Suggested Action	Foreseeable Benefits
Conservative nature of small school communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education of the community in terms of changes within the NSW Education Department which impinge on one-teacher schools. • Skill development programs to encourage and assist in community participation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community understanding and appreciation of changes. • More ready acceptance of changes. • Increased and more effective community participation.
Magnitude of the teaching principal's task.	<p>Increase support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • appointment of a full-time clerical assistant. • provide for the principal three hours of administration release. • provide two hours release from face-to-face teaching for the principal (release to be provided by a qualified teacher coming into the school). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved education for the children as the teaching principal would not be overwhelmed with administrative tasks. • Reduction in stress.
Isolation and lack of professional dialogue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase financial allocation to allow for increased video conferencing and teleconferencing between one-teacher schools. • Provision of E-Mail facilities on all computers. • Introduction of a monthly conference for one-teacher schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instant communication available. • Reduction in the feeling of isolation. • Opportunity to share problems, seek advice and discuss educational and policy issues. • Further professional development activities.

Table 3: Challenges in One-Teacher Schools

CONCLUSION

The environment in which education is taking place in the 1990s is very different from that which existed in previous decades. International and national influences have brought about significant changes to the Australian public sector with education being no exception. Indeed in the New South Wales State Education system unprecedented changes as a consequence of two reports by Dr Brian Scott saw the huge monolithic centralised system of education restructured. These changes have extended throughout the education system and flowed to influence local level policies and practices. This study examined the changing roles and relationships of principals of one-teacher schools and senior management of the North West Region of the New South Wales Department of School Education.

It was found that over a five year period the approaches employed by senior management to implement departmental policy changes altered significantly. A major challenge for the principals of the one-teacher schools was to embrace the self managing school concept and, as a consequence, adapt to their changing roles and responsibilities as well as their changing relationship with senior regional management.

While debate continues as to the current success and future expansion of the devolutionary process there exists in the one-teacher schools of the North West Region of the New South Wales Department of School Education a determination to embrace the self-managing school concept and take up the associated challenges.

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