

What does a reflective principal do?

(David Stewart. *spanzjournal*. The Journal of the Secondary Principals' Association of New Zealand August 2002.)

Being an educational leader

It is the principal who binds together the various threads of “values, leadership, vision and culture” (Campbell-Evans, 1993:110). For most school communities, there are competing goals, a wide spectrum of expectations, and a range of values that register almost all the possible points of view. The principal, in an effective school, acts as a filter and conduit for establishing the “core” values that the school will honour. Dimmock (1993) argues that we are yet to identify the variables that will allow us to identify which principals made a difference to student learning, and why this might be so. He states that “some do [make a difference] but most do not” (ibid:41).

The differences between those who do make a difference and those who do not, can often be explained by examining the way they think but even then “quite effective forms of principal practice are reported to have largely indirect effects on students” (Biesset et al 1982: Heck 1990: Leithwood and Montgomery 1986: Pitner 1988 as cited in Dimmock 1993:42). The major difficulty is that we just do not know what the intervening variables are but there is much evidence to support the concept of school culture in both its content and its application as being a most important factor. (Little 1982: Mortimer et al 1988) Those principals who are perceived to be effective may be those who by their actions shape and transform the culture to best encourage teaching and learning (Deal and Peterson 1991; Firestone and Wilson 1985; Hargreaves 1990; Leithwood and Jantzi 1990). Nevertheless, “leadership remains as Burns (1978) suggested, one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth” (Campbell-Evans 1993-99)

It is clear that the contradictions in public expectations are a key challenge for principals. Those who successfully deal with this uncertainty are those who are able to manage the culture (Campbell-Evans, 1993). Greenfield (1989) supported this reasoning when he described school administrators as “value carriers.” Whether or not principals can be directly connected to student learning may be still unproven, but there is a strong association between effective principalship and a school culture which supports learning. Fullan (1991:169) argues that “Serious reform... is changing the culture and structure of the school” and that this will not get done without the active involvement of the principal. By reform he is implying an improvement in teaching and learning. This view is supported by Sebring et al. (1995:68), who describe the principal as “the single most important actor in promoting reform at the building level.”

This article advances the argument that an educational leader wishing to promote learning through a focus on school culture needs to be, and been seen to be, a reflective practitioner.

Leading a learning community

When discussing change and restructuring in the Chicago school system, Bryk et al (1994), considered that schools could be ordered into four groups. The “environmental order schools” focused on safety, security, discipline and attendance issues. A second group were engaged in “peripheral academic change” but had no overall plan or sense of direction, and a third group were called “Christmas tree schools”, as they selected initiatives which “looked good” but

which were not necessarily connected to student learning. Only the fourth group, “emergent restructuring schools”, seemed to have a major chance of completing successful change. They were characterised by a “professional community” and “a sense of purpose” (ibid:76). It is this concept of community which brings together a number of threads in this work.

In defining their concept of school community, Sebring et al (1995:5) listed five features which created a professional community for teachers.

- regular opportunities for reflective dialogue;
- opportunities to visit colleagues, discuss their teaching and jointly solve problems;
- collaborate in teaching activities;
- work in a culture of shared values and beliefs rather than one based on rules and requirements; and
- focus main energy on student learning.

Furthermore, these researchers wrote that, “the positive effects of a professional community are unlikely to be realised in an individual school unless practices are normative, i.e., most of the teachers engage in them most of the time”(ibid:5).

All of these practices can begin with principals publicly demonstrating their own personal commitment to reflection and critique through the compilation of a professional portfolio. This is not the only means to this end of course, but it is a powerful personal example and, at the same time, an effective mechanism for advancing the primacy of learning in everything that they do in the school.

A focus on culture

This cultural view of schools would suggest that, in order to change the way that principals and other school professionals act, it is first necessary to change the way that they think (Leithwood and Steinback, 1993). As a consequence a whole new field of investigation has opened up in this area. These authors shed light on thinking through a study of problem solving. For others, “The culture is the manifestation of publicly stated personal values which have come to be shared and endorsed by others within the organisation” (Campbell-Evans 1993:95).

Some writers have characterised this kind of development as focusing on means before ends (Sergiovanni, 1996). Teachers commonly talk of how pleasantly surprised they were at some of the lesson outcomes. Their expectations had been wildly exceeded. Some talk of how the planned lesson changed quite dramatically as students interacted with the available material and with the ideas of each other. During effective teaching sessions, it is common for the *ends* to change as the *means* develop. The goal is reached and surpassed, or more meaningful goals are substituted, or a successful experience leads to totally unexpected outcomes. Many of the approaches mentioned above, such as ‘high performance theory’ or ‘organisational policy development’ are based around the idea that *ends* must be defined as a first step and teachers then simply need to uncover the *means* for achieving these goals. This is portrayed as a straight line process of filling the gap. There is no recognition that “the act of playing the game has a way of changing the rules” (Sergiovanni, 1996:35).

The School Development approach used in our recent work emphasises *means* as always the first step, as those cluster of aspects that we call culture, values, beliefs, shared understandings and taken for granted procedures, are likely to ensure that the *ends*, or what each student learns, will be idiosyncratically different. Even when engaged on developing a school vision, it is probably more important to have in place an effective process for discussing a possible vision than it is to reach an acceptable vision statement. The “final” statement may have a short currency. Alongside this emphasis on means first, is a consideration of individual beliefs. What teachers believe will have a profound influence on what they teach.

It is my view that effective schools are not necessarily correlated positively with completed strategic plans but rather associated with the number and variety of opportunities that teachers have for sharing critical narrative about teaching and learning. The leadership which allows this to happen could be called transformational. Policy becomes the statement of meaningful practice rather than a prescription for practice. In a sense, the policy becomes the “high ground” where “values are expressed through actions and through one’s judgement of the actions of others” (Dimmock, 1993:96). This “high ground” to be successful will have needed to have been developed collaboratively.

As Weik (1976) has noted, schools are loosely coupled organisations in which actions and developments in one section of the school may have little or no impact in another, and in which leaders and managers have only indirect influence over what happens in classrooms. Ten years later he refined this analysis by conceding that administrators in loosely coupled systems achieve influence by shaping the culture in which teachers work, and the perceptions and values they share (Weik, 1986).

In short, the principal cannot hope to control the direction of the school by directing the daily operations of classroom teachers as if they were process workers performing interlinked and easily monitored tasks. The best way to influence that direction is to identify, clarify, and modify the core culture of the school, perhaps in the form of goals or a mission statement, and then to take any and every opportunity to articulate and model those beliefs and values and shared understandings to enhance learning.

School Development and the centrality of learning

The approach, entitled “School Development”, aims to begin with a focus on principal development and the acquisition, by the principal, of the ability to be critically reflective. A move focussed on a greater understanding of the school culture is facilitated by the adoption of a preference for systematic data gathering and critique. Increasingly members of staff are also encouraged to analyse the key processes within the school and make overt the prevailing values, and norms of its population. As a consequence change and school renewal is likely to be constant and steady and incorporate existing effective practice. The culture of learning is widened to include all members of the school who increasingly perceive themselves as members of a community.

Implicit within this definition is the belief that such an effort must be collaborative and must deal with both real and perceived problems. Schools are viewed as unique cultural systems capable of self-improvement through applying behavioural science

techniques in reflective self-analytic ways. As such school development has to do with growth and effectiveness between and amongst the people in the school community.

Central to a school development approach is the focus on learning. Promoting learning for all is the pivotal role of the principal. Managing and further developing a culture to promote this centrality of learning should be the main work of school leaders.

Collecting evidence – progress towards set goals

It is not unreasonable to ask teaching professionals to demonstrate what they wish to attain, what progress they have made to date, and how it all fits with the overarching planning of the school. Similarly, school leaders should be able to demonstrate progress towards set goals. The problem, of course, is that the way forward is complex, subject to a wide range of contextual factors, and can be perceived differently dependant on the viewer's position within the school community. (What a board of trustee member views as "reasonable" may be quite different from an individual student's opinion for example.)

This paper suggests that one means of gathering evidence demonstrating an individual's consistency of thinking and acting, and how this behaviour moves progressively towards agreed goals is to construct a portfolio. The particular version of portfolio advanced in this case is *digital portfolio*.

That is not to say that school leaders and school professionals fail to collect evidence currently but rather to argue that the portfolio process has a number of advantages over many present procedures. For example, *digital portfolio* begins with a particular view of the leaders' job as expressed in the Conceptual Job Description. This combines many different actions together and acknowledges that leaders are multi-tasking most of the time they are awake. Use of this method enables the standards to be added after the event, as they most often are, rather than a device for initiating behaviour. Portfolio permits discrete selection of items, at or near the time they occur, and progressively builds a substantial database which can demonstrate the wide variety of tasks and procedures under hand at any particular time. Such a collection can then be selected amongst for a variety of audiences and events.

Digital Portfolio as a process

Digital Portfolio is presented as a process for operationalising reflective thinking and action. Whilst reflective critique is a vital component in every educator's arsenal, it is the consequent action which leads to improved student learning. The portfolio process links the thinking and the action together and provides a record of why particular actions were considered important at the time. It is appropriate that this particular adaptation of the portfolio process uses a conceptual view of the principal's job as the launching point.

The Conceptual Job Description as index and organiser

Tom Prebble and I began talking about a "Conceptual Job Description" in the lead up to "Tomorrow's Schools" on 1989-90. We first published these ideas in "The

Reflective Principal: Strategies for effective development”¹ in 1993. The concept has been further refined and the Education Ministry standards for principal development added in “Tomorrow’s Principals Today”²

This newly developed Conceptual job Description, which is really a way of thinking about the principal’s role, becomes the organiser and the index to the Digital Principal Portfolio. Progressively, as filestamps³ are placed in the various sections of the CJD, a comprehensive amalgam of actions and reflections is constructed as evidence of work in progress. This portfolio is never intended as a stand-alone document. It should always be linked with illustration, narrative and explanation. Constructing the portfolio is about assembling evidence of thinking and action which is tied to a particular context and time. These records contain subtleties that need conversation, metaphor and example to be understood by others.

Figure 1. Page 1(portion) of the Conceptual Job Description with filestamps added

| CONCEPTUAL JOB DESCRIPTION - PRINCIPAL | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Responsibilities</i> | | |
| 1. Lead, co-ordinate and facilitate the learning community | | |
| <i>Concept</i> | | |
| Establish and maintain a school where learning is a highly valued activity by all members of the school community. | | |
| KEY OBJECTIVES | RESULTS EXPECTED | STANDARD |
| Ensure that learning is the central focus of the school. File Stamp: 21/11/2001 D:\Page 1 Lead\ICT professional Development.doc 21/11/2001 D:\Page 1 Lead\ICT Review2.doc 21/11/2001 D:\Page 1 Lead\ICT timeline.doc 21/11/2001 D:\Page 1 Lead\StaffDev.doc | Teachers will seek learning success for students. All teachers will continue to learn new skills, new approaches, and widen their curriculum knowledge. Board of trustees and parents will be involved in learning. | PL1 PL2 RM1 |
| Design and plan programme evaluations. File Stamp: 21/11/2001 D:\Page 1 Lead\ICT Review2.doc 4/17/2001 D:\Page 1 Lead\Assessment policy.doc | Cumulative records will demonstrate effective programmes through growing student mastery. | PL3 |

¹ David Stewart and Tom Prebble. (1993) *The Reflective Principal: School development within a learning community.* ERCD Press Massey University. Palmerston North.

² David Stewart (2000) *Tomorrow’s Principals Today.* Kanuka Grove Press Massey University Palmerston North.

³ Hyperlinks to the completed artifacts

Progressive construction

When we address the concept of reflection from an educational leader's perspective, we are thinking about an integral set of behaviours. Reflection in this sense, is not something that can be put off until there is some *free* time, but rather is a form of thought that is constantly occurring and recurring as leaders go about their work. It is truly "reflection-in-action" (Schön 1983:42), and the on-going thinking is constantly reshaped by reaction and response from others and perception of consequence. It is this reflection-in-action which we aim to catch and retain within the portfolio.

In a real sense, an illustration of our thinking and action-response can be called an artifact. It exemplifies what we did, at that time, in that instance. As mentioned earlier, it needs careful interpretation but it provides a sign on the way in an intensely complicated and fast paced environment. Over time, a collection of such artifacts, ranging over the many facets of a leader's work, begins to provide a view of the way a particular leader thinks and acts. Careful selections can show progress towards set goals and sequences can demonstrate how thinking has changed and evolved as situations and knowledge has developed.

Evidence + talk

Portfolio construction links evidence and talk in a variety of contexts. As the database extends, so too do the range of applications for which it can be used. Importantly, the principal decides which aspects of on-going work to capture and retain and which subsets are used in subsequent conversations. A number of possible applications are discussed below.

Towards set goals

Page six of the Conceptual Job Description encourages school leaders to select and illustrate a range of goals under each of the major page headings:

Lead, coordinate and facilitate the learning community;
Manage and develop the school culture;
Take responsibility for school communication networks;
Play a figurehead role in representing the school; and
Personal professional development.⁴

By using the filestamp process on this page principals have a useful record which illustrates their dominant initiatives and the various links to the wide variety of other work in progress.

Appraisal

This goal page is an obvious start point for an appraisal process and then decisions may be made as to how such a process might best proceed. My own view is to encourage the detailed examination of one of the first five pages each year, supplemented by an overview of this goal page. Principals already engaged in this kind of development with the *Digital Principal Portfolio* report major satisfaction with this kind of process in that they feel well prepared, they have chosen the artifacts for discussion, and they can demonstrate how interconnected and contextual their work is. In the short time that this material has been available, I have had a few opportunities to talk with board of trustee chairpersons who have been involved in

⁴ See David Stewart. *Tomorrow's Principals Today* p168-176

appraisals using DPP. They have each expressed the view that a consequence of this procedure has been a greater understanding of both the work of the principal and the school programmes.

Self review

As the file stamps are progressively added to the CJD it becomes obvious which dimension is dominant. It is not surprising, for example, that many principals report significant undervaluing of their own personal professional development. Constructing the portfolio draws attention to imbalances in professional life and can act as a stimulant to changed action.

Professional discussion

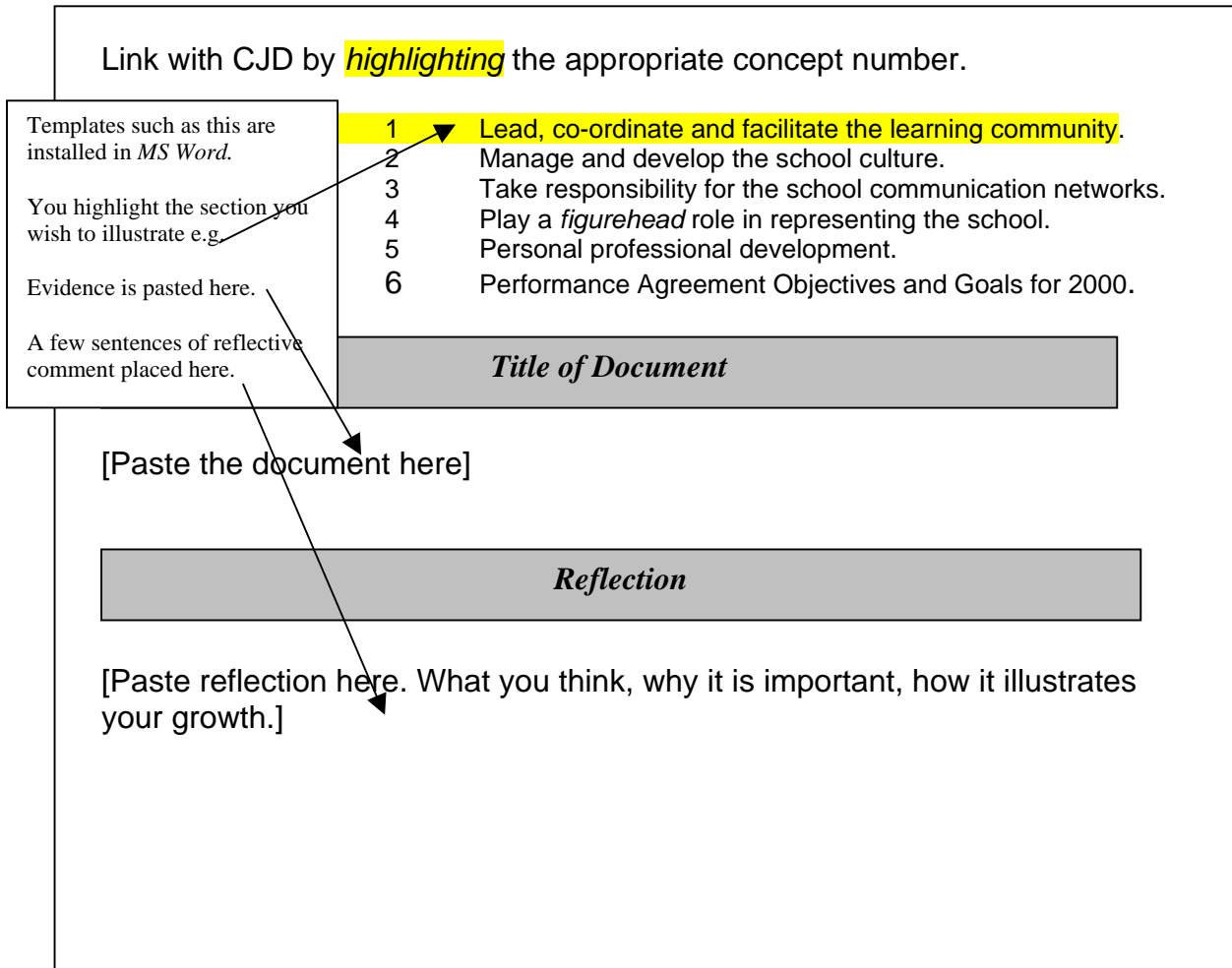
Congruent with the development of this version of portfolio has been my involvement with a number of clusters of school principals who chose to become members of a group mentor scheme. Here, we encouraged the participants to use artifacts from their developing portfolios as the basis of professional discussion. Many of these groups have now been meeting regularly for over two years and grounding their discussion with material that forms an integral part of their portfolio. Some have introduced *Digital Teacher Portfolio* to their schools and using the Quality Learning Circle⁵ notion ensured that similar discussions occur regular amongst staff.

School Development progression and reporting

Comprehensive and on-going collection of evidence, relating to school development is often left until an initiative has been completed. It is usually then both a chore and quite difficult to reconstruct. Portfolio construction does need organisation and commitment but the consequential rewards, in this area alone, are considerable. Reporting then becomes a simple selection amongst the variety of documents and comment that is available.

⁵ See David Stewart. *Tomorrow's Principals Today* p261-268

Figure 2. An example of a Portfolio artifact.⁶



⁶ The *Digital Principal Portfolio* program automatically installs a number of alternative templates for artifact construction in the *MS Word* program. These templates come with some automatic tracking headers and footers not shown in the example above.

Reflective critique – what's the point?

Leading a school is a creative, intellectual activity. It is a unique pursuit where most of what happens, happens inside peoples' heads and is hidden from view. At the same time there is a quite legitimate demand for observable and measurable indicators that demonstrate that everyone is doing their job. Judgements about effective performance often vary depending on the belief platform of the observer. Responsible educational leaders are constantly matching performance and belief, and as a consequence, adjusting their own behaviour to better achieve the desired outcomes. Reflective critique, catalogued within a portfolio process can both clarify the process for the participant and provide substantial evidence of thinking and acting for a third party.

A year-book record

A new routine has just been added to this package which enables principals to print out the whole record for the year, for filing for reference for example, or to print out selected records for particular purposes or audiences. This facility may be of particular interest to those principals who already engage with their peers in some focus group activity and wish to ground their discussions even more firmly in the learning and teaching arena.

Digital Portfolio – indexing the thinking

Using a taxonomy that acknowledges the contextual and multi-tasking nature of school leadership set within a human relationship domain, *digital portfolio* offers the possibility for principals to progressively index their thinking. Sharing some of the process with staff demonstrates that they are engaging in reflective practice. We know that a most effective means of spreading competent practice amongst teachers is to provide opportunities for them to discuss and critique their practice. Here we have the means for principals to *walk the talk*. Providing evidence supported by narrative and example is a powerful mechanism for gaining commitment to a particular course of action. Principals are constantly seeking to influence what teachers do and here is a course of action which can be modelled and marshalled as data.

This is what reflective principals do. They regularly engage in reflective action, perhaps by constructing a portfolio and they are seen to engage in reflective critique, both about their own work and the work of others.

Visit the website www.edex.net.nz if you would like to explore these ideas further or make contact with the writer.

David Stewart June 2002.

References

- Biesset, C & Nias J. 1992. *Working and Learning Together for Change*. Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Bryk, Anthony S John Q. Easton David Kerbow Sharon G Rollow Penny A Sebring. 1994. *The State of Chicago School Reform in Phi Delta Kappan*.
- Burns, J. 1978. *Leadership*. New York:Harper and Row
- Campbell-Evans, G. 1993. *A Values Perspective on School-based Management: School Based Management and School Effectiveness*. Longdon: Rontledge.
- Deal, T. and Peterson, K. 1991. *Instrumental and expressive aspects of school improvement*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Congress on Scholl Effectiveness and School Improvement at Cardiff.Wales.
- Dimmock, Clive ed. 1993. *School-based Management and School Effectiveness*. London: Rontledge.
- Firestone, W. A. Wilson B. L. 1985. *Using Bureaucratic and Cultural Linkages to Improve Instruction: The Principals' Contribution*. Educational Administration Quarterly 21(2): 7-30.
- Fullan, Michael G. 1991. *the New Meaning of Educational Change*. London: Cassell Educational Limited.
- Greenfield, T. B.1989. *The Decline and Fall of Science in Educational Administration; Interchange 2(2): 57-80*.
- Hargreaves, A. 1980. *Individualism and Individuality: Re-interpreting the Teacher Culture*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston.
- Heck, R. 1990. *Principals Instructional Leadership and the Identification of High and Low Achieving Schools: The Application of Discriminant Techniques*. Administration's Notebook: The University of Chicago 34(7).
- Leithwood, K. & Jantzi D. 1990. *Transformational Leadership: How Principals Can Help Reform School Cultures*. School Effectiveness and School Improvement 1(4): 249-50.
- Leithwood, K. Montgomery D. 1986. *Improving Principal Effectiveness: The Principal Profile*. Toronto: OISE Press.
- Leithwood, Kenneth and Rosanne Steinbach. 1991. *Indicators of Transformational Leadership in Everyday Problem solving of School Administrators in Journal of personnel evaluation in education, volume 4, 221-244*. USA: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Little, J. 1982. *Norms of Collegiality and Experimentation: Workplace Conditions of School Success*. American Educational Research Journal 19(3): 325-40.
- Mortimor, P. Sammons,P. Stoll, L. Lewis,D. Ecob,R. 1988. *School matters: the junior years*. Somerset: Open Books.
- Schon, D. A. 1983. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Sebring, P. B. Bryk A. S. Easton J. Q. et al. 1995. *Charting Reform:Chicago Teachers Take Stock: A report sponsored by the Consortium on Chicago School Research*.

- Sergiovanni T J. 1996. *Leadership for the Schoolhouse: How is it different? Why is it important?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Stewart, D. and Prebble, T. 1993. *The Reflective Principal: School development within a learning community*. Palmerston North. ERDC Press Massey University.
- Stewart, D. 2000. *Tomorrow's Principals Today*. Palmerston North. Kanuka Grove Press. Massey University.
- Weick, K.E. 1976. "Educational Organisations as loosely coupled systems" in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **21** (2), 1-19.
- Weick, K.E. 1986. The concept of loose coupling: An Assessment. *Organisational Theory Dialogue*, December.