

From Strategic to Proactive Leadership in Schools

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Shift toward school-based management

School-based management is increasingly common in many countries, including Australia, where it has received a strong boost from the 'Schools of the Future' program initiated by the in-coming Liberal government in Victoria. Decisions about such vital matters as finance, staffing and professional development which were once made by central bureaucracies are now increasingly made at the school level. Victoria's Schools of the Future will "have complete control over...financial resources and...the capacity to plan how these resources will be used across the full range of staff, services, equipment and supplies". Schools will be supported by 'business managers' and 'training and professional development will be required for principals, staff and council members'. The old central office will be progressively reduced to a 'strategic core'.¹

Such fundamental shifts clearly place very substantial burdens upon all concerned, especially principals. However, the theoretical foundations for such changes, particularly in relation to impacts and student outcomes is not well established.² Moreover, practical support for the kind of forward-looking leadership now being called for is limited at present. One reason for this is the lack of attention paid to the development of a substantive futures-oriented pedagogy.³ This paper focuses upon strategic leadership for four main reasons. First, it is one of four key dimensions of transformational leadership. Caldwell comments that strategic leadership "calls for unprecedented awareness of 'the larger picture' for education in the 1990s".⁴

Second, questions of leadership and management in devolved school systems have been identified as priorities by NBEET and by the Minister for Employment, Education and Training.⁵ These matters are central to the overall pursuit of quality and equality in educational provision. They are directly related to national well-being in an increasingly competitive international environment - particularly in regard to rapid developments in SE. Asia and the Pacific Basin. Hence, there are powerful *structural* forces behind the quest for better leadership and more effective management.

Third, the literature on leadership (and hence the theory and practice involved) suggests that systematic links have not yet been made in Australian education between leadership and the future context which it addresses. Such links have been made in other areas, such as business administration.⁶ Leadership is always toward something, yet, in terms of 'the larger picture' this forward-looking context has remained vague and undefined. Educational leaders, however, require practical methods that will enable them to create structural frameworks of the next two or three decades, using information now at hand.⁷ These frameworks, or decision contexts, should not rely on naive predictions or popularised accounts of so-called 'Megatrends'. They can be assembled from a range of more durable futures concepts, approaches and methods. Hence, this paper considers a revised model of leadership

and several means of methodological support. It is hoped that these will help to provide a more substantial foundation for the professional development of principals and others.

Significance of futures study for strategic leadership

Educational literature tends to be past or present-oriented. The futures literature is not well integrated within it. Yet the latter provides a number of theoretical and practical approaches for describing 'the larger picture' and methodologies for integrating this into educational practice. For example, Godet provides a 'Tool Box' of methods (including supporting software) for engaging in prospective study.⁸ Meadows describes the present state of the global environment in systems terms and derives policy guidelines helpful to educators.⁹ Milbrath has examined the nature of a transition to a sustainable society in great detail and provides many insights into the nature of this process.¹⁰ Harman has analysed the breakdown of the industrial worldview and isolated some of the elements of a post-materialist paradigm.¹¹ Slaughter has distilled some strategic concepts and methodologies currently used in corporate and other environments for educational use.¹²

Fullan's model of strategic leadership provides a useful starting point. It includes the following features.

- Keeping abreast of trends and issues, threats and opportunities in the school environment and in society at large, nationally and internationally; anticipating their impact on education generally and on the school in particular.
- Sharing such knowledge with others in the school's community and encouraging other school leaders to do the same in their areas of interest.
- Establishing structures and processes which enable the school to set priorities and formulate strategies which take account of likely and/or preferred futures; being a key source of expertise as these occur.
- Ensuring that the attention of the school community is focused on matters of strategic importance.
- Monitoring the implementation of strategies as well as emerging strategic issues in the wider environment; facilitating an ongoing process of review.¹³

Clearly these are demanding tasks. The theoretical, practical and methodological means of supporting them are uncommon both at the school level and the system level. In this key respect, therefore, existing provision appears deficient. This means that principals who wish to move in a more strategic and proactive direction are in a genuinely difficult position. How might this be addressed?

Part of the answer is implicit in the above. First, educators, and particularly educational leaders, need to draw much more widely upon the futures concepts and methods which have been developed in other contexts over the last 30 years. Second, an effective approach to methodological support is needed. Clearly there are no quick fixes. Both suggestions need to be seen as medium-term propositions, i.e., ideas that

can be implemented over several years. The following section considers some practical measures that could be initiated more rapidly.

Supporting proactive leadership in schools

The Fullan model of strategic leadership is valuable in part because it draws on corporate experience to highlight general aspects of management in turbulent environments. Yet it poses two major challenges for principals. First, it is probably too difficult to implement in these terms. Second, it fails to make a systematic link between educational leadership on the one hand, and futures concepts and methods on the other. This paper therefore proposes a simple model of proactive leadership which attempts to deal with these problems. However, it is first necessary to show why the attempt to be 'proactive' may be more appropriate than the attempt to be 'strategic'.

A strategic outlook is one which is keenly aware of a web of forces in the organisation's environment. It attempts to understand the prevailing conditions in order to make sensible day-to-day decisions. Questions such as resources, legislation, competition and market conditions are uppermost in this approach. These are important considerations, but they tend to be short-term and geared to the dynamics of the present. This is exactly the interest of commercial operations which are competing in a market context. For them 'the future' tends to be heavily discounted. What matters are market conditions this year, and perhaps the next. Such an interest is clearly inadequate for educators and schools.

The educational interest differs from the commercial one in many ways. Not least is that the former, by its very nature, *requires* a broad and long-term view. This is so because the educational project is never one which is satisfied or completed on a day-to-day basis. Rather, it is one which is in the business of (a) helping individuals to mature into responsible, caring adults and (b) contributing to the wider development and long-term well-being of society at large. Though it has been widely overlooked, this type of broad, long-term, social and cultural interest means that education is an *inherently* futures-oriented enterprise. Hence an appropriate model of leadership will necessarily go beyond questions of short-term strategy.

Such a model will be proactive for two key reasons. First, education is one of the great futures-shaping institutions of our society. Second, the futures we are looking at in the mid-1990s are exceptionally challenging.¹⁴ Put simply, moving blindly into the 21st Century is a certain recipe for disaster. Proactive leadership is therefore likely to have characteristics like the following.

- It uses futures concepts and literature.
- It deploys futures tools and techniques.
- It exploits the potential of information systems.
- It develops informed views of 'the larger picture'.

The final section of this paper suggests how, in practical terms, these suggestions may be operationalised. But first it should be acknowledged that understanding 'the larger picture' appears, at first sight, to present problems. How may these be addressed?

The quick answer is through research and scholarship. One of the distinctive features of the futures enterprise is the way it draws together information, insight and understanding culled from many other more specialised fields. The result is a continuously up-dated picture of continuity and change. The former include regularities such as language, seasons and physical principles which change slowly, if at all. The latter are processes which are studied by a wide variety of scientists, researchers and scholars. A careful review of both provides futures workers with the materials from which to construct their pictures, or scenarios, of 'things to come'. (Note that this excludes events - which are largely unpredictable.) So futures researchers and scholars have developed ways to understand 'the larger picture' and to clearly outline some of its structural features. Here, then, are ways of enabling a broader, long-term view.

- Developing an understanding of 'the real Megatrends'.
- Exploring the dimensions of the global problematique (the overlapping series of chronic global problems).
- Diagnosing the character of the transition from the industrial era.
- Seeking insights into the structural features of 'the 200-year present' (stretching 100 years back and 100 years ahead).
- Considering the nature of challenges, options and alternatives that emerge from the above.
- Reflecting upon the major implications for educational planning, policy and leadership.

Clearly, each of the above opens out into broader fields of enquiry. Yet as noted above, proactive leadership is not a 'quick fix'. Rather it is a medium-term, or longer, commitment to appropriate professional development. How, then, may this be approached?

Professional development for proactive leadership

There are at least five ways to develop a proactive leadership capacity in schools.

1. Explore the Futures Field

A special issue of the journal *Futures* provides an up-to-date 'snapshot' of 'the knowledge base of futures studies'. This provides a clear overview of key components of the area which include: futures concepts; language and metaphors; theories, ideas and imagery; speculative fiction; organisations and networks; methods, tools and practices; social innovation and social movements. The issue also included ten 'divergent perspectives' and an annotated bibliography.¹⁵ Alternatively, some of the works mentioned above provide access to core aspects of the field. *Futures Concepts and Powerful Ideas* includes an annotated bibliography of some 200 futures texts.¹⁶

2. Take a course or organise a professional development seminar.

The author offers two Master's courses, one at year 5 and another at year 6 levels. These are entitled: *Education for the 21st Century* and *Planning and Futures in Education*. They are offered within the Department of Policy, Context and Evaluation, Institute of Education, University of Melbourne. As such, they may be combined with complementary courses on subjects such as leadership, policy issues, change processes, evaluation etc, or with various thesis options, to create a full Master's program.¹⁷ This is a valuable way to build up professional expertise and to gain academic credit for so doing.

The two courses noted above provide an introduction to the literature, concepts, skills and methods of futures study in relation to education. On the other hand, courses, workshops and professional development seminars can be mounted externally, or in co-operation with a college or university department. For example, it seems likely that Victoria's Schools of the Future will require some such arrangement to cope with the sudden demand for professional training in school-based management. In short, the skills and methods of strategic and proactive leadership can certainly be taught and learned in many different ways.

3. Trial the QUEST workshop method

QUEST stands for the Quick Environmental Scanning Technique. It was developed about ten years ago and has been widely used in many types of organisations, including schools. It is based on two workshops. The first carries out a SWOTs analysis of the school (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) and brainstorms a list of trends and events that may affect the future of the school. Ten of these are entered into a cross-impact matrix, which provides a clear picture of their interactions. The matrix provides a basis for scenarios which are used in a second workshop to explore strategic options. This is a quick, inexpensive and effective way to help an organisation become more aware of some of the shaping forces in its environment, improve its strategic outlook and develop proactive skills.¹⁸

4. Develop Support Systems

Schools are increasingly being run as medium-sized businesses. The latter have for some time made use of a range of methods to support their decision-making and strategic capacities. A range of data-bases, digests and environmental scanning publications have developed to serve them. Two of the latter which are useful to schools are *Directions in Education*¹⁹ and *Future Survey*.²⁰

Beyond such publications are more specialised environmental scanning and strategic analysis systems which have been specifically designed for educational organisations. One was described in detail by Morrison a few years ago.²¹ Systems of this kind were not seen as important in the old, fairly static, centralised view of education. However, in the new context, they are likely to play a more active role. I've often pondered on the fact that government, business and industry have long used a wide range of futures tools, while educators did not even know that they existed. Such professional isolationism is rapidly becoming indefensible.

5. Revise Job Descriptions

One outcome of the QUEST process is that certain people are assigned to carry out certain tasks, possibly new ones. In the context of Australia in the 1990s and of the global outlook during this time, there is need to consider quite new types of skill-formation and job descriptions. If principals are becoming CEOs, then they will increasingly require the kind of organisational and professional support that other CEOs expect. They have rightly long ceased to have anything to do with 'milk money' or 'lost property'. If the argument set out above is accepted, then they will be looking at the present in greater depth and looking further ahead with every means at their disposal. Those means are a good deal more substantial than has ever been routinely applied in education.

The principal in the 1990s needs access to good quality information about the changing environment of the school and of the wider society and world of which it is part. He or she will therefore have increasing need of specialists whose job it is to scan those environments, interpret the signals of change and make them clearly available in a useful and digestible form. Given the long time-lag between the uptake of futures work in education and elsewhere, there is a case for developing this kind of expertise in schools as quickly as possible. This may mean appointing strategic analysts, forecasters or environmental scanners or, possibly, sharing these costs in various ways. Schools, or clusters of schools, may one day share the services of such specialists the way they now share school support centres or participate in professional associations. There will also be a role for external consultants with such expertise. Either way, schools will not turn their backs upon the past but, if they want to develop proactive leadership, they will put a great deal more time, attention and resources into exploring the near-term future with greater care than hitherto.

Conclusion

In all the commentaries about the outlook for the next 20 years, education nearly always comes out near the top of the list. It is seen by many informed observers to be one of the most important influences on national and global well-being. Yet, in the past, it has struggled with a past-oriented or short-term outlook, a rapidly changing environment and a distinct lack of professional expertise (to grasp 'the larger picture' and move ahead with confidence). The means to resolve this dilemma are now at hand.

Though an informed and proactive outlook does not, by any means, solve all the problems facing schools, it does provide the grounds from which solutions may emerge. Strategic leadership provides a good starting point, a way of beginning to define what is needed as we move toward the 21st Century. However, this paper has argued that this is not enough. It has suggested that proactive leadership is not only more desirable but more practicable. This is not a short-term proposition. It will take time. Yet the fusion of educational skills and capacities with those of prospective study and research represent an exciting and timely development which provides new inspiration and strength to hard-pressed administrators. Nor need they feel alone as they consider new professional options and alternatives. They are part of a wider shift. For example SEAMEO (the South East Asia Ministers of Education Organisation)

has recently completed a project to develop 'desirable scenarios for education to 2015'.²²

This itself is a signal, a datum, a precursor. It indicates a profound shift of emphasis in education, as elsewhere, *out* of the now-completed past and *toward* the yet-to-be-created future. This, I suggest, is perhaps the major professional challenge of the next decade - and beyond.

Notes

1. Directorate of School Education, 1993 p. 3-5.
2. Malen, Ogawa and Kranz, 1990 p 289.
3. Holbrook 1992.
4. Caldwell, 1992, p 10.
5. Review Panel, Strategic Review of Research in Education, 1992 p 81; and Beazley, K. 1993 p 10.
6. Nanus, 1992.
7. Beare and Slaughter, 1993.
8. Godet, 1991.
9. Meadows, 1992.
10. Milbrath, 1989.
11. Harman, 1988.
12. Slaughter, 1991.
13. Fullan, 1991.
14. Op cit, Beare & Slaughter, 1993, note 7.
15. The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies, 1993.
16. Slaughter, 1991 op cit note 12.
17. For details of courses write to Rae Massey, Dept. of Policy, Context and Evaluation Studies, University of Melbourne, Parkville 3052, or call on (03) 344 8220.
18. Slaughter, 1990.
19. Directions in Education, ACEA, Hawthorn.
20. Future Survey, World Future Society, 7910 Woodmont Ave., Suite 450, Bethesda, MD 20814, USA.
21. Morrison, 1987.
22. Habana, 1993.

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