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Journeys to school leadership: How action learning identified what participants valued in a year-long Australian leadership development program centered on principles of good practice

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Norman McCulla and Leoni Degenhardt

Abstract

The need to identify and suitably prepare teachers to undertake school leadership roles especially as principals is now well documented in the literature. Similarly documented is the general concern about the lack of suitable applicants willing to consider the role. This study raised the question of what might be learnt when a purposefully-selected cohort of 31 teachers drawn from executive, non-principal roles participated in a year-long, multi-phased leadership development program: *The Flagship Program* of the Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales, Australia (AIS). The design of the program was informed by internationally acknowledged principles of good practice in leadership preparation. Evaluation of the program combined action learning methodologies working with participants with more formal evaluation of each of the program's stages to investigate participant growth and program effectiveness. The action learning component undertaken with the direct involvement of all participants and with the support of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) was able to pinpoint what the participants themselves saw as important and what was less so at this stage of their preparation for school leadership roles. In so doing, the study adds a valuable participant perspective to the overall literature on leadership preparation.

Keywords

School leadership, leadership preparation, action research, Australian education

Preparing future school leaders

It is little wonder that recruitment, succession and assuring a supply of applicants for school leadership roles, and specifically that of the principal, are causes of concern in many nations. The expectations for today's school leaders have never been more ambitious (Robinson, 2011: 2). The

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role of educational leaders has changed considerably as many countries have transformed their education systems and schools (Degenhardt and Duignan, 2010; Walker and Hallinger, 2013). New conceptions of schooling and of the principalship therefore call for new conceptions of leadership and leadership preparation (Bezzina, 2012; Caldwell and Spinks, 2013; Dempster et al., 2011; Levin, 2013; Macpherson, 2009; Schleicher, 2012).

The inter-relationships between instructional/pedagogical leadership and the capacity to build and sustain transformational cultures in which teacher and student learning are prominent have been recognised (Day and Sammons, 2013). While there is strong evidence that instructional/pedagogical leadership has been shown to be central in promoting better academic outcomes for students (Hattie, 2009; Robinson et al., 2009), it is concluded that the two forms of leadership are not mutually exclusive. A combination of strategies can be most beneficial in ensuring school success. While some studies reveal the direct impact of principals' leadership on student outcomes (Branch et al., 2013), most leadership effects operate indirectly to promote student outcomes by supporting and enhancing conditions for teaching and learning and by their influence on teachers and their work (Drago-Severson, 2012; Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Zepeda, 2012).

Leithwood et al. (2006a; 2006b) note that syntheses of evidence provide considerable evidence about four sets of leadership qualities that underpin practice: vision and setting directions; understanding and developing people; redesigning the organisation; and managing the teaching and learning program. One important aspect of this, and one that is more difficult to research, is the individual values and vision with which principals go about their work. Leithwood et al. (2006b) acknowledge that:

the actual effects of all external experiences on leaders' practices are mediated by their inner lives - their thoughts, feelings, educational histories, professional identities, values and dispositions. These capacities and traits act as interpretive screens for leaders, as they do for all people, in making sense of the world 'out there'. They are the springboards for the practices leaders choose to enact, as well as the skill with which they enact them. (Leithwood et al., 2006b: 68)

Two questions arise. Firstly, how might this inner journey characteristic of school leadership be better understood in relation to an outer-focused journey – a journey of knowledge and skills acquisition which enables individuals to respond to the challenges and possibilities of constantly changing jurisdictional regulatory and accountability requirements as well as the local school context? Secondly, how might teachers who aspire to (or who are at least considering) formal positions of school leadership be best supported in their preparation so as to give insights into the qualities that underpin successful leadership and eventually lead to confident, capable and visionary performance in principal roles into the future?

Good practice in school leadership development

Numerous attempts have been made to identify principles of good practice that might underpin effective leadership development programs (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Dempster et al., 2011; Huber, 2013; NCSL, 2007; OECD, 2008; Schleicher, 2012; Walker et al., 2013). Programs categorised as “exemplary” tended to share a wide ranging yet consistent set of characteristics that encompassed program philosophy and curriculum design: active participant-centered instruction integrating theory and practice; instructional strategies that include problem-based learning, action research; field-based projects; journal writing; portfolios; substantial use of feedback and

assessment by peers, faculty, and the candidates themselves; program leaders who are knowledgeable in their subject areas, including both university academics and school-based practitioners experienced in school administration; and social and professional support in the form of a cohort structure and formalised mentoring and advising by expert principals (Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) in Schleicher, 2012: 23).

An OECD report on improving school leadership (2008: 107) concluded that effective approaches to developing school leaders needed methods and content that incorporated mentoring/coaching, work-based experiential learning, peer support and networking, and formal leadership learning programs.

Dempster et al. (2011) in their review of leadership professional development programs concluded that they needed to be philosophically and theoretically attuned to both individual and system needs in leadership and professional learning with primacy given to the dual aims of school improvement and the improvement of student learning and achievement. Informed by the weight of research evidence, such programs needed to be time-rich, allowing for learning sequences to be spaced and interspersed with collegial support, in-school applications and reflective encounters. They also needed to be practice-centered, context sensitive, and peer and partnership supported so that knowledge is taken back into the school in ways that maximise the effects of leadership capability. Good practice, they observed, is also committed to evaluating the effects on leaders, as well as on school practices to which their learning applies.

Taking a wider focus, Walker et al. (2013: 407, 418–420) identified common features in leadership preparation programs across five high-performing education systems (Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Singapore and the USA). They noted a degree of convergence in terms of three interdependent program components: framework, content and operation. Apart from these commonalities, Walker et al. (2013) also noted the impact that differing local and national contexts have in creating variations in terms of the enactment of each program. As a cautionary note Walker et al. observe, drawing on Huber and West (2002) and Roach et al. (2011), that within jurisdictions, various providers may be endorsed to deliver leadership programs that meet the requirements stipulated in jurisdictional frameworks. A possible consequence of this endorsement may be a narrowed choice of program content for aspiring leaders and, therefore, their learning outcomes as well.

In noting a high level of commonality in the content of contemporary leadership development programs, Walker et al. (2013) also observed that much of the research had been conducted in western countries. There was a shared emphasis on organisational, transformational and instructional leadership as well as traditional content areas such as “professional development, finance, curriculum, and external relations”. They note that a body of research also shows that common features embedded in leadership programs include the engagement of participants in the field through experiences such as internships or university–district partnerships. There is, therefore, a judicious blend of on-site and off-site professional learning (NCSL, 2007). Both strategies aim to address the provision of authentic leadership experiences for program participants. This suggests that leadership projects benefit from being coupled with extended periods in the field and well-developed mentorship structures.

Huber (2013) concluded that, in general, there is no single top-priority strategy or method in the professional development of school leaders; the use of a wide range of different strategies and methods is most effective. That said, it is not only the use of different learning approaches that matters, but also how they are conceptually linked and how this linkage is then experienced by the participants.

It would seem from the literature that there are no short cuts in the adequate preparation of school leaders. Collectively, the studies point to a need to design context-specific professional



Figure 1. Leadership development programs of the Leadership Centre of the Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales, 2014.

learning programs based on the identified principles of good practice in school leadership development. The studies point also to a need to further investigate the impact of leadership development programs that reflect these good-practice criteria from the perspective of participants themselves. More specifically, further investigation is needed into the relationship that exists between the personal, inner and autobiographical journey to leadership of the participant, and the values that underpin that journey on the one hand and, on the other, the outer contextual journey in which leadership operates in the jurisdiction in which it is set. What is not prominent in the literature are the views of program participants who embark on such a journey through multi-phase professional development programs characterised by principles of good practice in action.

The research opportunity

The year-long, multi-phased *Flagship Program* for leadership preparation of the Leadership Centre of the Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales, Australia (AIS) (*The Flagship Program*) provided a vehicle through which the individual journeys of participants could be followed as they explored aspects of school leader roles. The NSW independent school sector represents 15.9% of all students in the state with more than 380 schools directly affiliated with the AIS (AIS, 2014). As the peak body, AIS represents the interests of all independent schools in consultations with governments, statutory authorities and a wide range of other education stakeholders. Membership includes schools of many different types, sizes, religious affiliations and educational philosophies. A major focus of the Association's activities is to offer quality support to its member schools in areas such as professional development.

The positioning of *The Flagship Program* in relation to other professional development programs offered by the AIS Leadership Centre is outlined in Figure 1.

Design of *The Flagship Program* drew on internationally recognised principles of good practice drawn from the literature and from the input into the program of an international academic

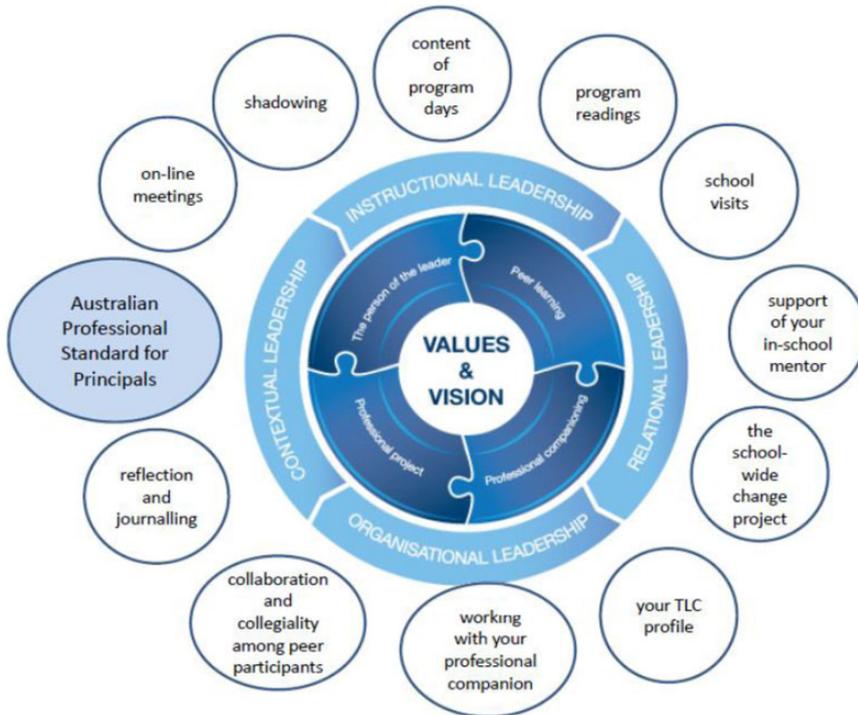


Figure 2. The Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales' Flagship Program, 2013.

advisory panel of experts prominent in the field. The 2013 membership of the panel consisted of Professors Brian Caldwell, Dame Pat Collarbone, Andy Hargreaves, David Hopkins, Viviane Robinson and Karen Seashore Louis (Degenhardt and McCulla, 2013a; 2013b).

Offered for the first time from December 2012 to November 2013, *The Flagship Program* was developed in response to a number of factors including the need for effective leadership preparation programs for an increasingly complex local, national and global context, and for succession planning for independent schools. Thirty-one participants were selected through application and interview to be part of the inaugural program. Participants were all experienced senior teachers in schools and at different points on their journey to leadership. Most held positions equivalent to deputy principal or senior co-ordinator with school-wide responsibilities as a member of their school's executive leadership team. Some had already been exposed to what principals do by virtue of their roles in working with their principals or acting in higher positions; others were still quite removed. Participants came from a wide range of schools – small and large; new and long-established; well-resourced and poorly-resourced; from city, country and coast, within and beyond NSW. Of the group, 18 were male and 13 were female.

The structure of *The Flagship Program* is summarised in Figure 2 and elaborated upon below.

The Flagship Program is based on a philosophy of holistic personal and professional learning and growth. It is premised on the belief that leadership is both an inner journey of growing

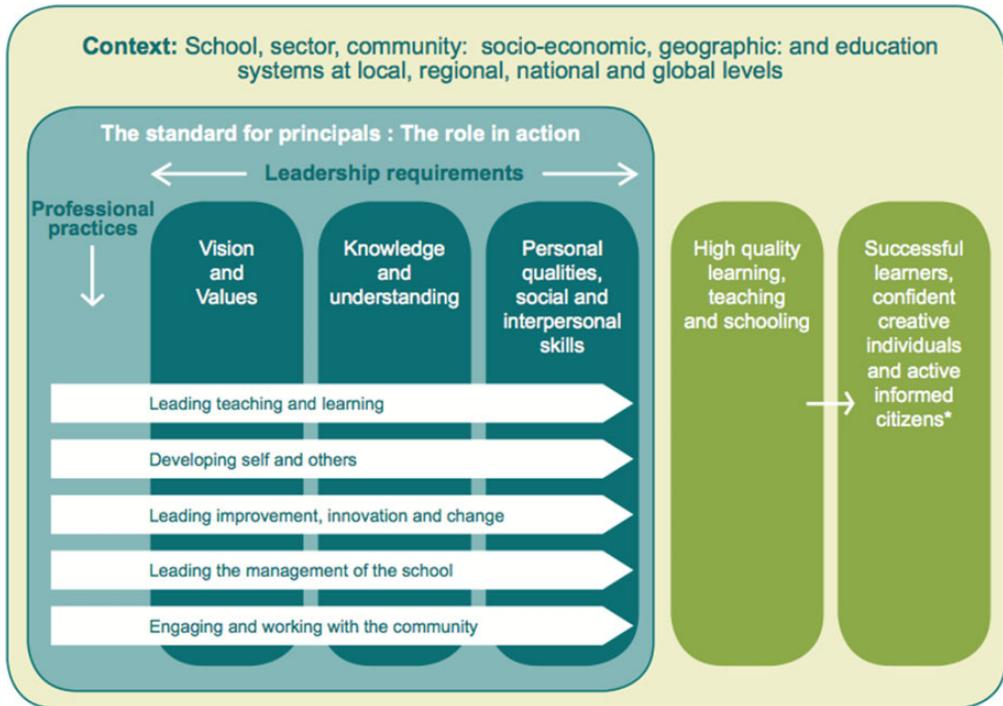


Figure 3. Australian Professional Standard for Principals. Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2011).

self-awareness and personal mastery as well as an outer journey of acquisition of appropriate knowledge and skills, and engagement with a range of people and contexts (AIS, 2013).

The program’s ten face-to-face days were clustered into four sessions of two or three days across the year, thereby enabling reflection and application of learning into participants’ everyday work.

The content of *The Flagship Program* days was grouped under four headings: Contextual Leadership; Instructional Leadership; Organisational Leadership; and Relational Leadership. The overall design of the program interpreted and reflected the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals*. Figure 3 illustrates.

One of the three leadership requirements within the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals* (APSP) (AITSL, 2011) is ‘Knowledge and understanding’. The content of the program days, and required readings, provided relevant knowledge, the understanding of which was demonstrated through reading tasks, a reflective journal, a school-wide improvement project, and a summative 5000 word paper.

Contextual Leadership included an understanding of the contemporary education context at global, national, regional, and local levels. The diversity of participant backgrounds provided an additional opportunity for a broadened understanding of context.

The Instructional Leadership aspect of *The Flagship Program* focused on ‘leading teaching and learning’, ‘developing self and others’ and ‘leading improvement, innovation and change’ – some of the professional practices advocated within the APSP. Participants focused on such elements as

professional learning communities and job-embedded professional learning, open to learning conversations, student voice, and to developing their personal philosophy of learning and schooling.

The area of Organisational Leadership covered resource management – human, financial and property. It also addressed strategy and change management, with insights from a panel of highly regarded educational, corporate and not-for-profit sector leaders. Many aspects of the APSP were addressed in this area: Leadership requirements of ‘vision and values’ and ‘knowledge and understanding’, and also professional practices of ‘leading improvement, innovation and change’, ‘leading the management of the school’, and ‘engaging and working with the community’. The latter aspect was also addressed in the content of Relational Leadership, particularly in managing the relationship with the governing body, staff, parents and local community. Issues around conflict management, managing critical incidents and managing the media were also seen as part of Relational Leadership.

The APSP leadership requirement of ‘Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills’ was relevant to *The Flagship Program’s* Relational Leadership, and also to one of the core elements of it: a focus on the person of the leader. The emphasis on understanding self was explored through *The Leadership Circle*TM 360 degree profile; through reflection and journaling; through a Heifetzian “case in point” approach to group analysis of the progress on the school-wide improvement project; and through the insights and questioning of a “professional companion” (Degenhardt, 2013). Collectively, these activities were designed to enhance “personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills” and the development of “self and others”.

One of the aspects described above in the literature as good practice is the incorporation of work-based practice into programs of leadership development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Dempster et al., 2011; Stoll and Harris, 2012). This was the role of the school-wide improvement project. It was explained to the applicant and his or her principal during the application and selection process that the school-wide improvement project was a program requirement that needed to be related to one of the school’s strategic goals.

Each participant nominated an in-school mentor whose role was to act as critical friend throughout the process. Participants also had each other as critical friends. Time was provided within the program for every participant to report multiple times on the progress of their project in small groups. The incisiveness of the questions asked by their peers developed over the course of the program as a result of which participants were both supported and challenged in their thinking. At the end of the program the in-school mentor was required to write a report on the participant’s leadership of the school-wide improvement project and the extent to which the project made a positive impact on student learning. Similarly, the principal was required to write a report on the degree to which the school-wide improvement project had been of value to the school.

While obviously most school-wide improvement projects which are truly strategic in nature will take more than a year to complete, or to evaluate summatively, the aim was two-fold: to achieve progress in an area that the school had identified as strategically valuable while at the same time developing leadership capabilities in the participant. Within the final day of the program each participant presented their project in poster form and spoke to their learnings about leadership and about change. Principals, in-school mentors, professional companions and others were invited to this presentation, which was a practical and symbolic celebration at the end of the program.

Projects selected by participants varied. Examples were as follows.

- Programming for understanding: building for performance (A focus on aligning a whole staff around enhancing student learning and outcomes through assessment tools and feedback).

- Translating the school's strategic intention of "creating a community of learners that is reflective, collaborative and supported by data and research" into practice.
- Portal – to improve communication and transparency of educational resources, information and school processes across a whole school community using technology.

Some projects were more ambitious than others. It was not the intention of *The Flagship Program* to make a comparison of the degree to which the projects were effective. Each of them achieved the intention of developing insights into the change process and the leadership capability of the participant who led them, as measured by the reports of their principals and in-school mentors, and also from the observation of the program developers and presenters.

It is also important to note here that the design of *The Flagship Program* respected the decision-making space of each participant as to whether he or she would be both ready and willing to apply for a principal's role at the conclusion of the program and, indeed, whether the principalship would be right for them and under what circumstances. There was no expectation that participants would automatically apply as an outcome of successfully completing the program. If upward career mobility was not to be an outcome, the program designers asserted that successful participation in *The Flagship Program* would also contribute to increased capability in current and future roles (AIS, 2013).

The research questions

Given the research opportunity described above, the inaugural *Flagship Program* raised the question of what could be learnt when a group of highly proficient teachers participated in a multi-phased and integrated year-long program of professional learning centered on recognised principles of good practice in leadership development. It also raised the question as to how might a research project working with participants provide insights into the ways in which each person came to reconcile the inner and outer dimensions of leadership roles through their engagement with the program's activities? What might come to the fore in the mix of activities as being most important to each of them at this stage of their professional learning? How might this impact, if at all, on school practice?

Research design and methodology

The overall evaluation of the inaugural *Flagship Program* centered on two dimensions

- A "horizontal dimension" comprised formal evaluations of each of *The Flagship Program's* stages and components undertaken by the program designers in association with its reference group (drawing on Huber, 2011).
- A "vertical dimension" that, through the application of principles of action research, attempted to tell the story of program implementation from participants' perspectives. This aspect was undertaken by an independent, university-based researcher in a participant–observer role and supported by a research grant from the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) as part of a national project on the preparation of school leaders. Professor Alma Harris and Dr Michelle Jones acted as critical friends to the national project. It is this dimension in particular that provides the basis of this article.

The action research component focused on working with the participants themselves as they progressed through *The Flagship Program*. In so doing, it helped align the research methodology with the holistic and developmental nature of the program itself.

Action research and professional learning

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) were among the first to observe that action research does not treat people as objects but rather as autonomous, responsible agents who participate actively in making their own histories. Fundamental to action research are cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Action research is concerned therefore with changing situations always with a view to improvement, not just interpreting them. Learning from one's own practice is grounded in the use of collaboration to forge new meanings from experience and offer a clear framework for action (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Harris and Jones, 2012; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005).

The nature of the action learning component was negotiated with and agreed to by participants at the outset of *The Flagship Program*. The study was conducted over three cycles to align with face-to-face seminars in the program: December 2012–March, 2013; April–July, 2013; August–October, 2013. Individual reflective “learning conversations” were held by telephone with 10 participants in each round. There was a 100% participation rate with all *Flagship Program* participants being involved in one of the three cycles. Learning conversations averaged around 45 minutes and were recorded by agreement for later analysis. Participants were selected at random for each round. The intention was to preserve the confidentiality of each participant and his/her school; investigate the impact of the program on the individual and their school; look for key themes that were emerging across all participants in each group of ten; triangulate the findings among the group of ten in a draft report for comment; and to circulate the report that emerged among all participants for any further feedback.

The “learning conversations” centered on a semi-structured series of open-ended questions that in general, encouraged participants to reflect on their progress to date in *The Flagship Program*, to identify any areas that were strengths or that may have problematic, and to project into the future.

Data from each round of learning conversations were analyzed using a grounded theory, constant comparative methodology (Bazeley, 2013; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to identify common themes that were emerging from the transcripts with direct quotes from participants cited in the subsequent reports as illustrative. Data gathered from the interviews were processed by the researcher in a three-stage process of open, axial and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Three reports were prepared telling the story of *The Flagship Program* from participant perspectives and their journeys within it (McCulla, 2013a; 2013b; 2013c). Each draft report was circulated among the 10 contributing participants for comment and any amendment before being circulated to all participants for their comment. This occurred progressively over the 12-month life of the program in April, August and November 2013, respectively. Each of the three cohorts consisted of 10 different participants so that all participants contributed voluntarily during the program. While it would have been also possible to simply follow the one cohort of 10 through the program, involving all participants was seen to be more inclusive and in line with the ethos of the program itself.

Given the use of a grounded theory approach, a further intention was to align what was learnt through the action research component of *The Flagship Program* with the broader literature on leadership preparation to identify points of both confirmation and of difference.

Key findings

The reports derived from three action learning cycles told in detail the emerging story of *The Flagship Program* from participant perspectives. Overall, 94 findings were identified drawing on the themes that progressively emerged from the three action learning cycles. Prominent themes among these findings are discussed below under four broad headings: program learning outcomes; recruitment, selection and transitioning to leadership; bridging the program–school practice interface; and endpoints for learning.

Program learning outcomes

The program in relation to the literature on good practice in leadership preparation

Involvement in *The Flagship Program* was reported as being highly successful in the minds of the participants. Participants came to view *The Flagship Program* as a multi-dimensional yet holistic program, asserting that the real value of the program resided in individual interpretation and personal development. From a diversity of starting points with regard to personal and professional experience as well as school roles, participants were able to share common experiences through the program structures, feel supported by a collegial network, yet determine and act on implications at a personal level.

The findings here appear to validate the mix of learning strategies within the program and the principles of good practice in leadership preparation in the international literature from which they were derived. What is of interest for further research is the ways in which program participants personalised their learning, verified in the transcripts, within the overall and supportive structure of the program.

Of some significance, recommendations made by participants in both the action learning and program evaluation components focused more on helpful suggestions for fine tuning some procedural aspects rather than on any major concern with the substantive structure, strategies or processes of *The Flagship Program* itself.

Participants commented:

The Flagship Program has reinforced my belief in the vocation of education, and reinvigorated my passion to take on the adventurous, exciting and richly rewarding role of school leadership. It has achieved this by offering a unique blend of ingredients: contemporary theory and real-world practice, engaging and authentic presenters who have ‘walked the talk’, and the highly prized opportunity to be partnered with a professional companion. (Male, secondary school program director)

The Flagship Program is an excellent and enjoyable model for developing sustainable leadership practice. The balance of attention to personal relationships and growth, academic rigour and organisational knowledge, with a constant focus on the moral imperative of student learning has been a great professional learning experience. I have no doubt I will continue to reap the benefits of this program for years to come. (Female, Deputy Principal, secondary school)

Reconciling the inner and outer dimensions of leadership

With regard to the inner, personal dimension of *The Flagship Program* and the outer, contextual dimension of leadership, participants viewed the inner journey as being the most important to their

own development. Put another way, knowing yourself was given precedence at this stage in preparing for leadership over developing any specific knowledge or skills required to lead and manage a school, while recognising that both are inter-related.

The balance between the two has been pivotal. I have been to so much about leadership that is just about skills rather than being true to yourself and continuing with a mission and a vision, trusting in people. (The two dimensions) have been complementary and that has been a real strength of the course. A lot of schools are faith-based schools. It has been a lovely balance. It has been quite refreshing. As a leader, who you are is what you do. There is a lot of integrity required of leadership and that comes down to personal qualities. (Participant 30)

Overall, the learning derived from *The Flagship Program* was substantively different for some participants from what they initially believed they might learn in the program. A number had initial expectations that the program would be more focused on input-based skill development. There was a growing recognition that interpretation ultimately rested with the individual.

There are some commonalities in *The Flagship Program* and a sense of working together but you really need to work out what it means for you. (*The Flagship Program*) is more personalised than what I expected. The first readings pointed to that and that is what I found. You have to work out what the implications are for you. (Participant 27)

Learning about oneself

Foremost among new insights and understandings that were reported by participants was a better understanding of oneself in the day-by-day life of the school community. *The Leadership Circle*TM (TLC) 360° analysis was instrumental in developing these insights along with follow-up discussions with a principal provided by *The Flagship Program* acting as a professional companion. A number of participants rated themselves lower in areas of self-esteem than did their peers or supervisors. This was explained in general by the observation that classroom teaching is not an ego-driven profession and that developing a more public presence in a leadership role is something that needs to be learnt without sacrificing a sense of personal humility. Consistent with the findings of Huber (2013), participants rated this aspect of *The Flagship Program* highly.

The contextual dimensions will continue to change. What doesn't change is the way you relate to people. The contextual information (provided in *The Flagship Program*), while good currently, will change. If there is a change in government, what won't change is the way you work with staff; how you manage yourself and work with others. (Participant 27)

Links to professional standards

Participants viewed *The Flagship Program* as covering all aspects of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's *Australian Professional Standard for Principals* (AITSL, 2011) and affirmed the validity and veracity of those standards through their involvement in the program. Of particular interest was the affirmation given by participants to the central importance of personal vision and values and how that impacts on inter-personal relationships with others, noting that these are prominent within the Standard.

In a number of ways, participants viewed *The Flagship Program* as bringing the Standard “to life” and as validating its contents, thus adding a further layer to what has already been an extensive validation process (Dinham et al., 2013).

Some speakers – Pat Duignan, Andy Hargreaves – and readings did have a strong focus on the ethical/spiritual realm; on a holistic view of leadership. I did find these (aspects) quite well presented in a secular training course . . . Everyone could take some truths away from that. The development of personal qualities was a strong point. It is often the weak point in other courses I have done. I found it quite refreshing that, with the modern empiricism, people were not beguiled into thinking that everything should come down to a formula or a datasheet. Vision and values (in the Standard) were well done by *The Flagship Program*. (Participant 23)

Participants observed that the first phase of *The Flagship Program* was essential in establishing the centrality of values in authentic personal and institutional leadership. In so doing, it served as an essential exercise in personal values clarification. It was also important in establishing the centrality of one-to-one relationships in school leadership. This is significant in that any of the other dimensions of leadership beyond the relational – that is, contextual, instructional or organizational – could have been the starting point. Of equal significance is the fact that participants also continued to re-affirm the relational dimension as the key point of their learning in the program as other dimensions were addressed.

Recruitment, selection and transitioning to leadership

Entry to The Flagship Program

The reasons participants applied for entry to *The Flagship Program* were varied, and reflected the diversity among the participants themselves, the roles they occupied, and their experience to date in leadership roles. As a consequence, their expectations of what they would learn in the program itself varied. The two dominant reasons for entry, however, centered on encouragement and support from principals and other school executive and a recognised need to address perceived skill gaps in making the transition. The study affirmed that the importance of the informal mentoring and support from principals and other school executive to step up to the leadership roles cannot be under-estimated in succession planning (see also McCulla, 2012). The findings here also emphasise the value that Darling-Hammond et al (in Schleicher, 2012: 23) place on ‘vigorous, targeted recruitment and selection to seek out expert teachers with leadership potential’.

Transitions to leadership

For a number of participants, there was a realisation that transitioning to a principal’s role meant unlearning old professional behaviors that had served them well in progressing from classroom teaching to a deputy-equivalent role, often related to issues of control, in favour of learning new and more distributive behaviors required of the principalship. There is a tension therefore in becoming a school leader that involves learning how to move away from being a ‘hands-on doer’ with a tendency to control in a way that is characteristic and perhaps even a necessity in classroom and middle-management roles.

The challenge for me is to undo the patterns of what I have been doing these last few years. (*The Flagship Program*) has confirmed for me that it is timely to do this. To clearly lead some agendas in the school and work with people. I feel that I had lost a lot of energy myself in doing that work. It is now a good opportunity to step back into it. The coaching experience has been good in maneuvering myself back into that space. (Participant 22)

The need for new learning about having personal “presence” in the leadership role- of building relationships; and of “slowing things down” personally in order to “speed things up” – was indeed new learning and sometimes counter-intuitive to the behaviors required for success in previous roles. Foremost among the new behaviors that participants reported as being important were ones of articulating and being consistent with one’s personal vision and values, and reflecting these in interpersonal relationships.

The readings and input helped me to refocus about the leader as a person and about how to be present in the workplace. That is quite difficult in a busy workplace. It is now in the front of my mind. Not that it is rocket science. It is just that I should try not to let things get away from me. The readings brought to mind how important it is to be real and present to the people you are dealing with. It seemed that the whole room was saying that; this is what we have to achieve. (Participant 4)

These are interesting findings in the context of a broader focus on the career trajectories of teachers generally and, more specifically, that of the various stages of the principalship from recruitment and preparation, and ultimately to separation, where more work remains to be done (Day and Gu, 2010; Oplatka, 2004).

Bridging the program-school practice interface

Collegial support

Consistent with the above findings, the relational aspect of *The Flagship Program* was also seen by participants as highly important. Communication and collaboration emerged among some participants outside of the formal requirements of the program. Participants were of the view that the use of technology in effectively supporting communication between face-to-face sessions, while valuable, needed even further development. The importance of the interpersonal relationships among participants emerged as a key contributor to the overall success of the program. Participants reported that they looked forward to the next stages in each of the cycles. The data within the learning conversations revealed that the momentum of the program was sustained in particular by professional relationships among participants; between participants and professional companions; and between participants and the program leaders.

I have really liked how different *The Flagship Program* is because of its practicality and the way it unites data-based research and great leaders with a down to earth practical approach . . . A mentor who is an ex principal; a visit to shadow a current principal; encouragement to visit schools; that we were given a reflective journal; that we were encouraged to have a professional companion . . . (The Program leaders’) personable support. It is quite a great course in terms of having an audacious goal. It is not just all data or all personal. It has the balance right. The uniqueness of this course is quite special. While there is a focus on and a drive to the principalship, I came to this course to be a better leader. It has

noble goals of developing leadership skills. I really liked how many modes it uses to do that. (Participant 23)

The findings in this area confirmed the emphasis placed in the literature on supportive peer networks.

Working with established principals

The structured experience of shadowing a principal was seen by most participants to be a highly valuable one. So too was the ‘professional companionship’ role of working with a former or current principal especially in discussing the outcomes and the implications of the 360° *Leadership Circle*TM (TLC) profile. Different from but drawing on mentor and coaching roles (Degenhardt, 2013), the professional companionship role was highly valued by participants.

Being a principal is not the same as it was 20 years ago. Principals now have many things to do: to trust a team; to delegate; to have processes and systems in place. You can’t be micro-managing everything . . . Through shadowing I saw a number of those things in action. Delegation. Trust. Calmness. The ability to listen. Open to all. You can’t solve things immediately but you can listen intently. The (shadowed) principal was working through different issues every half hour, all handled with authority and calmness. That’s the way to do it. (Participant 7)

Leading school-wide improvement projects

There was substantial evidence in the individual reports of school improvement projects led by participants of the ways in which *The Flagship Program* was already impacting on schools, thus reflecting a degree of sustainability and transfer of learning into everyday practice. The program provided a supportive structure that was seen as strengthening the school-wide improvement process, in some instances providing a form of legitimacy in the school for redeveloping or confirming aspects of school vision, mission and/or culture.

Participants observed that change emanating from their participation in *The Flagship Program* was also manifesting itself in other ways in their schools relating to overall strategic planning, working with and supporting staff, listening to students, better understanding of working with the school board and so forth.

While the school-wide improvement project appeared to be an obvious example as to how *The Flagship Program* was impacting on schools, those who chose to cite it as an example were also now more conscious of the complexities of the change process and the time required for successful implementation.

Bridging leadership and school governance

For many teachers considering taking the step from deputy roles to the principalship, working with the school board introduced a range of factors that were seen to impact on school leadership. The relationship between principal and chair of the board or school council, and with the board or council members themselves, raised the question of the degree of alignment between the values and vision of each. Developing this relationship was seen as a major step in the new learning required by teachers, taking them to the wider world of governance and professional advocacy. With all the

possibilities that could have been identified here in moving to a principal's role, it is of interest that this was the area on which many participants chose to focus their response. Once again, the relational aspect of the principal's role came to the fore.

What has been most interesting has been the dynamic of working with school boards- not that I was unfamiliar with them. It has just been the opportunity to observe how different principals act with different boards. It was not an eye opener in terms of surprises but an opportunity to see different forms of relationships. (Participant 12)

Reconciling personal and professional life

Modelling effective leadership

Participants came to the view that implementation of leadership development programs such as *The Flagship Program* must model the substance of what is being advocated in the program itself. Put another way, program leaders must 'walk the walk' as well as 'talk the talk' in their leadership and in the learning culture among participants that results. Program leaders with recognised credentials in having successfully led schools or been involved in school leadership, and who modelled the ethos of the program in its delivery, were seen to be instrumental to program success in this regard.

Challenge, rigour and professional life

While there is presently no requirement in Australia for principals to hold Masters degrees, of some interest was the fact that 18 of the 31 participants already held Masters-level qualifications. A small number of participants, generally without these qualifications, initially questioned what they perceived as the highly-rigorous academic nature of *The Flagship Program* with its readings, required reviews of articles and written responses. Participants acknowledged that the high standards set by the program over a 12-month time frame in its readings and related activities, face-to-face sessions and learning activities required a balance to be struck with the ongoing demands of their professional roles. Overall, participation in *The Flagship Program* was seen to be intense but its intent and rigour came to be appreciated by participants and the time commitment increasingly accepted as the program continued. One Australian university has awarded credit amounting to one quarter of a Masters degree in Educational Leadership to those who have successfully completed *The Flagship Program*. Other Australian universities are likely to do the same under new recognition of prior learning arrangements.

On applying for principal roles

Having opportunities to act in principal roles was seen by participants as being instrumental in building confidence to undertake the role. The caveat to this observation is that the question was sometimes interpreted as undertaking the principal's role in the same school. Participants felt less assured in applying for roles in other schools on several grounds. These included finding the right 'fit' between personal, professional values and school ethos, and an assessment of the impact on family and on self. All of these came into consideration when the possibility of applying for a principal's role was considered.

Participants recorded appreciation of the decision-making space *The Flagship Program* provided with regard to their assessment of their own preparedness, and willingness, to apply for principal roles. There was a general consensus when asked to rate 'preparedness' on a scale of one to ten that one could never be 'fully prepared' given the ever-changing nature of the role. Most recorded around eight on the scale as an outcome of the program with that justification. 'Willingness' to apply on the other hand elicited a range of responses. While most were willing, one or two had reached the conclusion that a principal's role was not for them; others saw family responsibilities as coming first, at least in the short term. The majority, however, felt both ready and willing to apply for the role.

Endpoints for learning

What did you learn from The Flagship Program?

As a holistic program, an intention of *The Flagship Program* had been to provide the structure and the support for personalised levels of interpretation. This intent appears to have been realised in the data generated in the three sets of learning conversations with participants.

A summative question in the third and final cycle of learning conversations invited participants to reflect on what they felt were their key areas of learning from their participation in *The Flagship Program*. The participants described their endpoints for learning in the program predominantly in terms of strengths that had been developed. The responses were individual and covered a wide gamut of possible areas. That said, the majority of participants reaffirmed that knowing oneself better as a leader, the interpersonal and relational aspects of leadership, and understanding the importance of people and relationships to effective school leadership and capacity building among staff were the most prominent parts of their learning. Collectively, these strengths were viewed as being more important than the day-to-day administrative tasks confronted by school leaders which, it was thought, could be learnt more on the job. Of significance, there were no common areas that emerged that were of concern to participants with regard to being unaddressed developmental needs. Reflections were individual.

I have a lot of work to do on instructional leadership and some of those personal dimensions, and building the confidence and courage that is needed... I feel much more insightful and aware about the (principal) role. Much more aware of the complexity and demands at this level. There is a big jump from being a deputy principal to being a principal. Whether I have the right skills and attributes. Whether I actually have the right desire and commitment. (The principal's role) will take a big hunk of your time and you start to worry about balance. (Participant 28)

Limitations

There are two fundamental issues in reporting on the outcomes of a multi-phased and multi-faceted professional development program of this nature. The first is that, by its nature, the program is indeed a holistic one and that, particularly where collaborative and participative research methodologies are in use, participant responses are therefore both holistic and individualised. Each of the elements that we have at least touched on here, both in the structure of *The Flagship Program* and in participant responses, could and should be the subjects of much deeper analyses and discussion in their own right. An article of this nature can only 'scrape the surface' of some of the insights that are being

generated from the participant perspective. The richness and detail of the research lies in the transcripts of each participant of which we have attempted to provide some illustrative examples.

A second issue that needs to be recorded is that we are also conscious of ‘the halo effect’ that might have arisen as participants fully engaged with *The Flagship Program* and its rigorous requirements and built strong, inter-personal networks with other participants and the program leaders. While we have been able to work with participants to share their individual and collective journeys at a point in time, their journey in another sense is only just starting. What now transpires will be of interest. Who will apply for principal roles? Who will be successful and who will not? How and in what ways, if at all, will *The Flagship Program* continue to influence the participants in whatever roles they undertake? Through longitudinal studies currently being set in place with participants we are hoping to address some of these questions.

Concluding remarks

Why is it, then, that aspirant leaders focused so much on the personal values and interpersonal relationships inherent in leadership and less so on the instructional, organisational and contextual domains of leadership? Could it be a logical corollary of this preparatory phase of leadership recognising, as does Oplatka (2004: 44–45), that leadership as a stage of teachers’ career-path trajectories is characterised by phases from preparation to separation and that each of these has different focuses? If this is the case, assumptions about the centrality of a leadership focus such as instructional leadership or distributive leadership or contextual leadership to professional learning may have greater currency at different and later phases of developing through the principalship. While it is one thing to at least sensitise participants to the importance of these in programs like *The Flagship Program*, participants here were of the view that it would be unlikely to be achieved without first clarifying one’s own values and building strong, interpersonal relationships with staff, and that these were the areas that they felt the most need to develop at this stage in their journeys to leadership. Participant responses confirmed the emphasis program designers placed on these aspects of leadership.

We observed at the outset of this article that the action research methodology on which this study is centered is indeed oriented to a context that is local, personalised and therefore highly relevant to the participants. That said, there are some things we believe can be said with confidence.

First, the mix of strategies derived from internationally recognised good practice in leadership development were embraced by participants as being successful. Practice in this sense further validated the theory as it did in participant recognition of the AITSL *Australian Professional Standard for Principals*. As was noted from the literature, there do not appear to be any “short-cuts” in the effective preparation of school leaders. This raises important questions as to how programs such as *The Flagship Program* might be scaled up and adequately resourced to offer developmental opportunities for greater numbers of teachers considering leadership.

Secondly, re-inventing oneself as a principal from successful classroom and middle management roles does indeed require new understandings and behaviors the nature of which we are only just coming to fully appreciate in teachers’ career path trajectories.

Finally, the emphasis placed by participants on the importance of exploring and confirming one’s own values and vision as the cornerstones for leadership suggests that more emphasis needs to be placed on understanding this inner journey. It raises the question of how it

manifests itself in the structure of professional development programs for leadership and in one-to-one relationships with professional colleagues, parents and students at this and other stages of leadership preparation and support. It also raises the question of where the emphasis might be placed in subsequent phases of professional development in the leadership journey through induction and on to continuing professional development as an experienced principal. In so doing, it suggests a need to reconcile our concern for student-centered instructional leadership with a concern for the more adult-centric nuances of transformational leadership if an unhelpful dichotomy is to be avoided between the two.

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