

Key Stakeholders' Perceptions of Effective School Leadership

Educational Management
Administration & Leadership
40(2) 232–247
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1741143211432412
emal.sagepub.com



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Abstract

There has been limited research on how teachers, parents and students perceive effective school leadership in practice. The purpose of this article is to present some of the findings derived from a study of key stakeholders' perceptions of effective school leadership. Key stakeholders were identified as teachers, students and parents. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from one large girl's school in Sydney, Australia. This research relied largely upon interview responses from teachers, students and parents of one Catholic school. While further insight into the issues may require a longitudinal data that describe perceptions from a substantial number of schools over time, studying one school provided a deeper and detailed understanding of key stakeholders' perceptions. Findings highlight the complexity of school leadership practices. Key stakeholders' in this study have also provide us with a useful emphasis on core school leadership dimensions, which they associate with effective school outcomes and improvement. These include administration, responsibility to ensure quality teaching and learning and relational leadership. Stakeholders answers to the question of what makes principals effective and which principal behaviours are most consistent with school effectiveness and improvement provides principals with an important knowledge base for practice.

Keywords

leadership, leadership effectiveness, management, school effectiveness, school improvement, schools, school vision, stakeholders

Introduction

School leadership has become a priority in education policy agendas internationally. It continues to play a prominent role on the stage of school improvement and effectiveness debate. As Australia seeks to adapt its education system to the needs of contemporary society, school leadership expectations are changing. In line with these changes, the roles and responsibilities

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of school leaders have expanded and intensified. Given the increased autonomy and accountability of schools, leadership at the school level is more important than ever. For example, there are concerns across the country that the role of the school leader as conceived for needs of the past is no longer appropriate. However, the powerful impact of school leadership on the process of effectiveness and improvement remain one of the fundamental tenets of research and practice in the country.

Many researchers in the Asia Pacific (Caldwell, 1998; Cheng, 1994; Mulford and Silins, 2009; Robinson et al., 2008) have investigated the contribution of school leadership to school improvement and effectiveness. Research findings from diverse countries and school contexts draw a similar conclusion: schools that make a difference in students' learning are led by effective leaders who make a significant and measurable contribution to the effectiveness of staff and in the learning of pupils in their charge (Bosker, 1997; Drysdale et al., 2009; Leithwood et al., 2008; Scheerens and Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000).

There has also been an abundance of research looking at what constitutes effective school leadership (Harris, 1999; Marks and Printy, 2003). While these findings offer a lot to policymakers and practitioners, most of the research has tended to explain this by focusing on the school leaders' perspectives. Many of these studies have tried to reveal the conception of the principals' role as a school leader, their skills and activities from the 'voice' of the school leaders themselves and have generally generated descriptions of what principals do. In Australia, much of the recent work seems to have investigated the ways in which school leaders are prepared for their role (Clarke and Wildy, 2010).

There has been very little research seeking to understand how and in what ways the key stakeholders view effective school leadership. As our education systems move to the stage referred to by Cranston (2007) as 'the golden age', it has become important that we take into consideration and understand the perceptions of the beneficiaries of education regarding effective school leadership. We have therefore argued that this is a timely focus given our understanding of schools as deeply complex organizations (Clarke and Wildy, 2010).

Over the years, the principal has consistently been regarded by teachers, parents, students, the wider community and the system as 'the leader' of the school (Cranston, 2007: iv). This same recognition of importance has spread throughout recent educational leadership and management literature, which has acknowledged how improvement, development and sustainability of success can be maintained and facilitated through the guidance and leadership of an effective school leader. This area of school leadership has attracted considerable interest internationally and nationally where research has overwhelmingly concluded that effective school leadership and effective schooling are inseparable from one another (Dinham, 2007; Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Marzano et al., 2005; Riley and Louis, 2000; Sergiovanni, 2000).

In this traditional view, school leadership is synonymous with formal authority within the school and there has been a call by a number of researchers for none-traditional perspectives to be considered (see Harris et al., 2003; also Day et al., 2000; Lambert, 1998). There has been a limited amount of research on how key stakeholders perceive and receive the outcomes of effective school leadership. The researchers therefore looked at effective school leadership from this viewpoint and considered teachers, parents and students as the key stakeholders of education. In understanding key stakeholders' perceptions of effective school leadership and gaining insight into how school leaders understand their own role, we may be able to draw links between how the two are closely related and what implications this may have for the school effectiveness debate.

Research focus and method

The purpose of this study was to investigate key stakeholders' perceptions of effective school leadership and the principals understanding of their role as school leaders. We developed two questions to guide our investigation:

- (1) How is effective school leadership perceived by:
 - (a) staff of the school;
 - (b) parents of the students of the school;
 - (c) students of the school.
- (2) How do principals understand their role as school leaders?

Our research was guided by a desire to find out what key stakeholders perceive as effective school leadership. We identified the key stakeholders as teachers, students and parents. This article therefore focuses specifically on findings regarding the first specific research question.

In order to address these questions, we used non-experimental research design (Pedhazur et al., 1991) based on a qualitatively oriented case study research method. In treating each stakeholders' views with the same value, the researchers were able to come to a more cohesive and holistic understanding of how key stakeholders understand effective school leadership.

We adopted an approach that would provide in-depth and rich understanding of the stakeholders' perceptions. The research was conducted in a large girls-only Catholic high school in Sydney, Australia with a student population of 800 ranging from Year 7 to Year 12, one permanent female principal, a vice-principal, 60 teachers and a number of specialist and support staff. The case study school was selected on the basis that the principal (although relatively new to her role as the school leader having been in her second year as principal for the first time) had been identified by independent review and renewal reports by the Catholic Education Office (earlier in the year) and by peers as an effective school leader. It was also well known that publicly acknowledged effective school leaders had worked in this school before. For example, the school's immediate past principal was described by many and was well known to have 'revolutionized the school and brought about recognizable success' (as one parent clearly put it).

The researchers exercised their own judgement in choosing the school, which is a feature of purposive sampling in case study research where the researcher makes contact with a case with a particular focus in mind (Tashakorri and Teddlie, 2009; Wellington, 2001). Purposive sampling involves selecting particular cases or units 'based on a specific purpose rather than randomly' (Tashakorri and Teddlie, 2003: 713) where the sampling specifically addresses the research questions. The chosen case was seen as being rich in information in regards to the questions the researchers wanted to answer, and offering a major focus for the investigation (Tashakorri and Teddlie, 2009: 173–174).

A total of 26 teachers, 12 students (two from each year level, from Years 7–12) and 12 parents (two parents of students from each year level, from Years 7–12) were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection technique for this study. The flexible nature of semi-structured interviews gave participants the ability to share rich and exploratory data, that at times the researcher may not have expected, allowing the opportunity for new information to emerge (Yin, 2003). The use of semi-structured interviews for this study had the added purpose of giving a 'voice' to parents and students in particular, whose voices are often overlooked in educational leadership research (Rudduck, 1993: 8).

Ethical issues that case studies pose are numerous and every effort was made to address these issues. In this study, the competence, role and responsibility of the researchers; the integrity of the study; and the rights and the protection of the participants were the main concerns. To ensure the protection of the participants, approval for undertaking the study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at our university, the Catholic Education Office (CEO) in Sydney and the school principal. The research design incorporated anonymity of the participants and protected the identity of the institution. Participants' rights to privacy, anonymity and confidentiality in their participation was clearly stated in participant information statements (given to participants) and consent forms (signed and collected from the participants) prior to participation in the study. These forms outlined the details of the study and participants' rights to withdraw at any time without affecting their relationship with the university or the researchers.

Data analysis involved 'breaking down the data' into manageable themes, patterns, trends and relationships. The results were then compared with the themes found within all the interviews and thus a categorical aggregation process took place (Stake, 1995). The emerging relationships found between categories were anticipated to reveal common themes understood by each of the key stakeholders about effective school leadership.

Findings and Discussion

Five key themes emerged through analysis and interpretation of research data that throw light into the way key stakeholders viewed effective school leadership. These were: (1) the school principal's use of administrative powers (administration); (2) the principal's responsibility to ensure quality teaching and learning (instruction leadership); (3) relational leadership as being crucial for strong school communities (internal and external relations); (4) the challenging nature of school leadership; and (5) the role of the principal in religious leadership and organizational management.

Use of Administrative Power by the School Principal

The issue of the principal's power was a consistent theme emerging from the data. Three main findings about what stakeholders understood about the power of the school principal were revealed:

- (1) principals do have power and this comes with their role;
- (2) this power is recognized as legitimate in being able to improve and maintain a school's effectiveness; and
- (3) this power is valued by stakeholders.

In addition, the data revealed that stakeholders regarded the principal's power as functioning in two main ways:

- (1) power through action; and
- (2) power through word.

Power through action refers to stakeholders' responses that the principal's power lies in his/her decision-making skills, whereas power through word refers to what the principal says as having great weight and influence. The enactment of the principal's power through what she does and what she says as the school's leader is seen as being a highly influential force in maintaining and

improving a school's effectiveness. However the views between teachers, students and parents differed slightly in regards to how this power is delivered.

The teachers revealed that the power of the principal is 'imperative [and] comes with the role' where she is the 'big boss' and is responsible for the 'ultimate decision making' within schools. They made it clear that this power is essential for a principal to be able to make decisions that benefit the whole school community:

Of course the principal has power . . . it is her role to compromise and organize the school according to the best interests of the staff and school community. (Teacher E)

More specifically the teachers revealed how the 'final decisions' a principal makes have an 'impact on what goes on in a classroom' (Teacher B). This not only highlights the indirect effect principals can have on student achievement as found within the literature (Griffith, 2004; Hallinger et al., 1996; Leithwood, 2005; Quinn, 2002; Ross and Gray, 2006) but also illustrates the direct effect the principal's decisions can have on a teacher's ability to carry out effective teaching.

The stakeholders consistently emphasized that the principal has a role in making difficult administrative decisions and therefore needed this administrative power. They identified a number of administrative roles that can effectively be done through these powers. These included managing school schedules, student discipline, student services, budget, resources and student and teacher attendance.

It is clear that teachers not only recognize the principal's power but are dependent on it for the positive impact it can make within the classroom. The power of the principal was not seen as being necessarily manipulative or negative but rather purposeful and effective.

Students in the study emphasized that they valued their principal as an 'authority figure'. However, they were quick to clarify that this does not mean that they see her as overbearing, untrustworthy or someone to be feared. The similarities in the teachers' and students' views about the beneficial nature of the principal's power highlight the need for respect and trust to be shared between the principal and the stakeholders.

However, teachers recognized the principal's positive influence of power through action, while students perceive it through word. Students regarded the principal as a role model: someone to be respected and someone whom they looked to for motivation and inspiration. Students perceived the principal as someone who not only should 'make decisions that reflect [the] wants and needs of students, parents and teachers' (Student H), but also as someone whose words have the power to make a positive impact on four key areas of student experience: learning, discipline, confidence and welfare.

Responses from students clearly show how much weight and significance a principal's word can have on student motivation and achievement. Student G summarized this perfectly:

. . . when the principal talks to us at assemblies, what she says is stronger, like even though there are more teachers, and only one Ms. Klein, what she says is stronger.

Parents perceived the power of the principal as functioning through word and action to ensure the quality of their children's education remains high. How the principal decides to distribute funds, format timetables and give approval to extra-curricular events is crucial to providing the opportunities parents wish for their children. The ways in which the principal motivates and 'keeps tabs'

on staff was considered essential to how a principal ensures that she is providing the best education for their children. Parents identified that a principal's power works from an overarching angle where what they do and say 'at the top' (Parent P) will 'trickle down' to the teachers and then to the students. This highlights how important parents value a principal's power in being able to motivate, guide and support staff in order for them to feel positive and well nurtured as teachers of the school.

Responsibility to Ensure Quality of Teaching and Learning (Instruction Leadership)

Instructional leadership represents the set of tasks in which principals engage in order to promote, support and improve teaching and learning. The researchers therefore defined the quality of teaching and learning to include academic achievement, as well as the provision of opportunities for students to develop within other areas of school life which allow them to grow into confident and secure individuals. The data revealed four key areas of a principal's responsibility in achieving quality teaching and learning as perceived by the stakeholders:

- evaluating teachers and providing feedback-including classroom observation;
- maintaining a vision for the school's future;
- supplying the adequate resources for teachers to carry out their jobs effectively; and
- improving student achievement.

Teachers, students and parents consistently mentioned the evaluative role the principal plays with regard to classroom instruction: evaluating curriculum and instruction and providing instructional feedback. They noted that this anchors the principal's effectiveness as a leader of school instruction.

Teachers and parents identified how a principal's vision for the school is vital to maintaining the school's level of progress and growth. Teachers are dependent on the principal to show them their vision of the school for direction as much as purpose. One teacher put it rather well:

... they [Principals] lead what you do [and] it comes down from them ... if they can't tell us what that vision is or show us what it is then we don't know where we are going. (Teacher C).

This indicated that the teachers were happy to have the principal take a leading role in developing the school's vision as well as the practical steps needed to attain that vision. However, this does not replace the traditional teacher leadership roles, such as department heads. It does not ignore the invisible leadership of lower level staff nor decrease teacher participation in the decision making process.

Parents emphasized the importance for the principal to develop a 'four or five year plan' (Parent P) where they needed to be 'innovative and look to the future' (Parent O) with their vision. Parents regard principals as leading the way in the improvement, development and progress of a school as they want their children to be receiving the very best education, just as much as teachers do. Students therefore are the focus of the vision where the quality of their education is of paramount concern to the principal, teachers and parents.

The responsibility of the principal to provide adequate space, resources and facilities for teachers to carry out their teaching effectively was recognized by each of the stakeholders as crucial to

ensuring quality teaching and learning for students. The stakeholders clearly indicated that this was crucial for effective school leadership:

- Parents noted how the availability of resources and opportunities the school offered was a key factor in choosing to enrol in a school. They stressed that it is the principal's responsibility to provide this in terms of deciding where school funds are invested.
- Teachers in the study valued their principal's ability to develop equitable and fair policies for the distribution of funds to different subject areas. The funding and support given in training teachers with the recent ICT development in Australian schools were regarded by teachers as enabling them to be more creative and innovative with their teaching. Teachers viewed the principal's responsibility and commitment to provide adequate resources, distribute the resources equitably and to use the resources to train teachers to improve their teaching as key elements of effective leadership.
- Students also recognized the importance of equal distribution of funds to 'benefit all areas of the school' (Student K). They were vocal about the need for the principal to value all areas of school life equally, supporting each of the developments and catering for every student's interests.

Lastly, the indirect yet highly influential impact principals can have on student achievement was identified by stakeholders. The stakeholders noted that teachers have the greatest impact on students' learning because students spend most of their time in school working with and around teachers. This is compatible with existing theory (Griffith, 2004; Hallinger et al., 1996; Leithwood, 2005; Quinn, 2002; Ross and Gray, 2006). Students and parents consistently stressed that it was the principal's responsibility to keep teachers in line' (Student I) and to ensure that 'when a teacher isn't doing her job' [that she] must make sure they are' (Student J) by 'taking action [and] keeping tabs on them' (Parent P). The perceptions indicated the belief by parents and teachers that one of the key factors of effective school leadership is the level of influence a principal exercises upon their staff to ensure that the students receive a quality education.

Overall, parents and students also consistently emphasized that teachers need to feel supported and be given incentives and motivation to strive for the best from their leader in order to teach effectively. This can only happen if the principal has formed a positive working relationship with their staff and highlights the importance and effect principal teacher relationships can have on the quality of teaching and learning for students. This 'trickle-down effect' revealed itself quite frequently in the responses between all stakeholders and illustrates the depth of perceptions stakeholders have of how interconnected and interrelated relationships within school are:

Teachers:

If there is strong leadership at the top that filter down all the way through ... what happens at the top permeates down to staff and students. (Teacher B)

Students:

... [the principal] sets all the rules and stuff, and all the teachers look up to her to see how they're supposed to act and we look up to our teachers, so if it's not strong at the top then it goes all the way down to the bottom ... (Student J)

Parents:

... if you're a strong leader then you're going to have supportive staff and strong staff and that is going to flow down and hit the students. (Parent M)

In these range of desirable characteristics, participants indicated that effective school leaders should demonstrate personal strengths particularly in remaining calm under pressure and making difficult decisions since some decisions may not be comfortable for everyone. Strong leadership artfully combines pressure and support in a way that moves schools relentlessly toward accomplishing student achievement goals, utilizing indicators, cultivating assistance and collaboration, and building productive school settings (McDougall et al., 2007: 53). However, our analysis suggests that it is also crucial to balance strong principal leadership with more distributed decision making to improve the professional culture and the quality of instruction in schools. Balancing strong principal leadership with more distributed leadership is difficult but not impossible. In schools where faculties are implementing this model, instructional improvements tend to come gradually and only through shared effort and commitment of teachers and administrators (McDougall et al., 2007; Saunders et al., 2009).

Relational Leadership Is Crucial to Building a Strong School Community

This dimension of leadership effectiveness captured both internal and external relations and trust between the school leader and key stakeholders. Internal relations specifically captured effectiveness tasks related to principals capacities for building strong interpersonal relationships within the school whereas external relations dimension was with regard to tasks related to principal's work with stakeholders beyond the school. It was clear from the data that teachers, parents and students valued their principal's ability to develop good relationship with them. The perceptions are discussed under three key relationships:

- principal–teacher relationships;
- principal–student relationships;
- principal–parent relationships.

Principal–Teacher Relationship

Principal–teacher relationship vary greatly among schools and even among teachers at the same school and these relationships affect students' achievement (Walsh, 2005). Teachers in the study found the support of a principal as crucial to their ability to carry out their teaching effectively and argued that good leadership was important to them as it affected their decisions about where to work. They consistently mentioned that the school principal has a high regard for staff in the way she addresses staff during meetings, commends them for their efforts and shows a 'genuine concern' for all teachers. Her regular interaction with staff, willingness to give advice and open-door policy are not only signs of her interest and care for teacher's work but also of how important the relationships with staff members are to her in building a strong community. They consistently stressed how they valued both their professional and personal relationship with the principal:

Teaching and learning is the most important aspect in a school—if I'm not supported and encouraged, how can I be effective? (Teacher R).

In addition, the teachers emphasized that the type of community their principal seeks to build among her staff is one of collaboration and partnership where she sees 'greater strength in everyone pulling together'. The establishment of a team environment and being a team player is crucial in her role as school leader. Teachers further emphasized the need for principals to be trusting, motivating and communicative forces within their school communities.

Teachers identified trust in a community as 'imperative' and the foundation from which a community builds upon: 'when you don't have trust you don't have that control, without trust you won't have that sense of community' (Teacher A). Without trust, a community can fall apart and 'break-down' resulting in an unsatisfactory work environment for teachers and students. This was more accurately told by Teacher D in a previous school experience where the absence of positive principal-teacher relationships resulted in 'in-fighting' and 'gossiping' between staff which inevitably affected her ability to assist students effectively.

Teachers felt that they were more able to work with passion and purpose when the principal believes in their work and capabilities. The statement below characterizes this feeling:

The principal must ensure her staff are motivated and driven. This creates good morale among the staff and the desire to work themselves and their students to the best of their ability. This is done by showing care and appreciation for staff and the work they have done, as well as encouraging the setting and achieving a/higher goals. (Teacher E)

The impact that this key relationship can have on the strength of the school community was evident in students' and parents' perceptions of how important it is for the principal to build strong relationships with teachers. Parents believe that if 'you have a happy staff *you* will have happy lessons' and 'then the kids will be happy too' (Parent N, original emphasis). They recognize how both the principal and teachers are dependent on each other to provide for the students, and that it is essential for the principal to gain their support and trust. Similarly, students highlighted the need for the principal and teachers to 'feel comfortable' around one another in order to establish some sort of loyalty to each other.

There is an emerging body of literature focusing on the importance of principal teacher relationships rather than merely leadership styles or behaviours (for example, Odhiambo, 2007). Across Australia, both principals and teachers have to contend with many matters such as student discipline. In dealing with such issues, the teacher and principal have to work as a team (Kritsonis, 2000) and this calls for a good personal and professional relationship between the two. The teachers' view that their relationship with the principal has an influence on student performance and experiences fits with research in this area. Robinson et al. (2008) for example clearly indicated that the principal's support for staff can have a great effect on students' learning outcomes.

Principal-Student Relationship

The relationships a principal seeks to form with students not only ensures a high level of enjoyment students feel for school but also makes students feel like valued members of the school community. This is clearly highlighted in the experience shared by one student about the principal's presence during a retreat:

... she came to our retreat and she was really nice and I thought she was only going to stay for the evening session, but she stayed the night until the next morning and I don't know ... that was really a big change because it was really nice to have the person who runs everything there with you and not just behind the scenes. (Student J)

Students appreciate the time the principal takes to spend with them, equating it with the care and interest she has in them. Though the majority of students interviewed indicated their understanding of the fact that Mrs Klein (pseudonym) is busy and has little time to interact with them, one student argued that she would like to see her around more often. Most of the students felt that the effort she made during lunchtimes to talk to students, attend their extra-curricular events and congratulating them in her office when they had done something well was a 'huge effort'.

It is clear that through relationships, the common stereotype of the 'strict' principal can be broken down. A Year 12 student described the 'real personal interest the principal shows in everyone when reflecting on the new Year 12 progress initiative started this year'. They explained that the principal meets with groups of Year 12 students at a time to talk about their progress, discover how they are feeling and find out if there is anything she can do to tell teachers on how to improve their teaching.

Student G who had the principal as her classroom teacher and thought that she was going to be 'really strict' instead found her 'really laid back' where students '[didn't] see her as a principal but as any other teacher'. In this way, Mrs Klein seems to have broken down the common stereotypes students have of her. Although she is in a position of power and influence, she can still relate with the students in different aspects.

Teachers and parents also recognize how important it is for the principal to be visible among the students. This presence allows students to have a greater understanding of her, feel comfortable around her and form a meaningful relationship with her. As a result, the culture of the school can further 'flourish' where each member of the school knows they are 'individually important and trusted' (Teacher E). The personal connection she makes with students cannot be overestimated as students place significant weight in the care and concern she shows for them and their education. In this way the high expectations she has of students is further enforced in the way she relates and believes in them.

Principal-Parent Relationship

Data revealed how the relationship between the principal and parents helps to build a school's reputation within the wider community. Parents saw the principal's commitment to effective communication and having a good relationship with them as key elements of effective leadership. They regarded Mrs Klein as 'a strong reflection of [the] school' where for a few parents the principal became the final deciding factor for sending their daughter to Sunflower School (pseudonym). The way in which the principal cemented their confidence in the school to provide the best for their daughter is described as:

I know people who had their minds set on going somewhere else have come here instead because they have been so impressed with what the principal has had to say and have been sold -not sold but they think 'wow, if my kids can do half the things that you're saying these kids can do, then I'm there'. (Parent N)

In being visible to parents and the wider community, the principal actively becomes the 'face of the school' and is regarded as the embodiment of the values and culture of the school. The parents

described the principal as ‘motivational’ and ‘meticulous’. Parents consistently stressed that they reviewed the school’s effectiveness by asking one another: ‘What is the principal like?’ ‘How did the principal go?’ and argued that they attributed an effective school to the quality of leadership in place. The parents’ perceptions were compatible with existing theory that the school effectiveness fundamentally depends on school leadership. School leaders are held accountable for how well teachers teach and how well students learn (Dinham, 2005; Fullan, 2002; Sergiovanni, 2001), and are essential responsible for high-quality education (Hallinger, 2003; Harris, 2005; Leithwood and Riehl, 2003; Kurland et al., 2010).

Challenges for School Leadership

It was clear that key stakeholders have high expectations of the principal to provide the best for students through the relationships and culture of the work she sustains within the school community. Each stakeholder group recognized the challenging nature of the principal’s job and emphasized four key areas of difficulty:

- (1) inability to please all stakeholder groups;
- (2) making tough decisions;
- (3) business of the job; and
- (4) that leadership can affect stakeholder opinions of an effective school.

Stakeholders recognized the principal’s inability to please all groups, a situation in which she ‘is never going to keep everyone happy’ and that the decisions she makes will never be supported by all individuals. One parent captured this clearly when he said:

A principal has to put up with parents, teachers and students, so the role of the principal is worth, worth its weight . . . a principal doesn’t work eight hours a day, you know I think she works about ten to twelve hours a day, so to try and meet every requirement of teachers’ and parents’ needs is a big ask. (Parent Q)

Even younger students from years 7 to 9 easily recognize the challenging nature of the job, and saw the principal as someone with ‘huge responsibilities’ (student F), who was expected to know ‘what the teachers want, what the parents want, what the students want and how best to do everything’ (student H).

The difficulty a principal faces in this regard was admired by stakeholders especially teachers and parents who both express how they ‘wouldn’t want her job’ due to the sheer ‘business that comes with the role’. Both groups understood how tiring the role must be, but that it must be a role principals enjoy and take on ‘willingly’:

I mean it must drive them crazy but they have to be [here for the] extra-curricular things, P&F meetings, ex-students things, CEO things, professional development . . . , a terribly demanding job that they have got, but . . . you have to love it, and you know it’s going to take up so much of your time that you probably don’t have much of life outside particularly during the term. (Teacher D)

. . . I think it’s an incredibly hard job, I know principals work such long days . . . it’s total career, and it’s not a job I’d want, I’d probably appreciate that, but even though you know it’s an incredibly

difficult job with huge hours, it's the job, they take on willingly and they have to be really answerable to these things. (Parent O)

Role of the Principal in Religious Leadership and Organizational Management

Stakeholders emphasized the strong focus on pastoral care at the school when describing the school's culture and what they liked most about the school. They felt that school leadership effectiveness should be linked to effective pastoral care. Pastoral care is a priority in Catholic schools in which principals are expected to practice pastoral leadership that is 'characterized by integrating the academic, social and religious dimensions of a school's energy so that an atmosphere of care and support prevails within the community' (Treston, cited in Callery, 1998: 77). This opinion was shared by stakeholders where the feelings of encouragement, collaboration and genuine concern for individuals are expressed as strengths of the community by teachers, students and parents.

The practice of religious leadership is seen in the everyday life of the school through regular prayers, the priority given to religion during timetabling and the social justice activities, which raise money for the sisters of the order the school is affiliated with. One teacher described the Catholic dimension of the school as echoed in the school's ethos and the 'philosophies [which] underpin the culture of the school'. In making this a focus, teachers, students and parents emphasized that it is the principal's responsibility to ensure this type of culture is established and maintained.

Although not every stakeholder interviewed made explicit reference to the religious nature of the school, half of the students spoke about how the principal would want them to 'carry out a life like Christ'; 'be active within your church community' and 'follow in Jesus' way'. The faith-centred nature of the school is important to many of the stakeholders, who value the constant care and support shown by staff and students to each other. Though this same environment may exist in schools without a religious dimension, it is clear in the responses that many stakeholders associate this with the religious ethos of the school, which is brought alive by the principal and teachers in the culture of the school. This was clearly described by a parent:

... she[the principal] has a lot of respect knowing the difficulties that are out there with parents and teenage girls, she has a lot of understanding ... that's what I like about the Catholic school because it tries to incorporate the whole community, and the principal takes that on and she tries to include them, and there are a lot of families that are battling and struggling economically but she takes them in and she makes them feel very welcome, and there's no difference between that student or that student because of any social barriers. (Parent M)

The catholic schools are unique because they provide a religious community within a learning community. The parent's response seems to reflect Grace's (1996) argument that catholic education is moral and spiritual concerned with principal behaviour and focused upon community and public good. The importance of community, moral commitment to caring, social justice and common good are emphasized in most Catholic education systems.

Conclusion

The issues presented in this article provide a glimpse of the complicated and yet important role of the school principal and the stakeholders perceptions of effective school leadership. Stakeholders

were clear about the impact of leadership on school organization, efficiency and overall effectiveness. The general satisfaction of teachers, students and parents was greatly influenced by their perceptions of how effective they regarded the principal's leadership. This highlights how stakeholders associate an effective school with the leadership of its principal (Chen, 2008; Crum and Sherman 2008). Teachers' perceptions and expectations of a school leader were consistent with the findings in the literature (Griffith, 2004; Dinham, 2005; Pashiardis, 2005). However, of greater significance were the perceptions of parents and students about the contribution of leadership to school effectiveness. The study assumed their responses would not have the same detail as teachers but this was not the case. The depth, breadth and clarity of their views gave greater weight to the general findings of how a principal exercises her power for the benefit of a school and its students, and illustrated how connected parents and students were to leadership within the school. Moreover, the speed in which the recruitment circular was answered and the honesty of stakeholders suggests how effective school leadership is important and highly regarded by the school community.

The findings clearly indicated that stakeholders felt it was important for the school principal to establish positive working relationships with individual teachers and students to ensure the effective running of a school. The influence a principal is able to make with individuals on a personal level was considered invaluable and serves to promote the open and affirming culture of the school. This reflects similar findings by Beatty (2007: 388) who emphasizes the importance for principals to structure time 'for meaningful collaborations' so that relationships and a shared trust can be built. However, it is important to note that effective collaboration is not always easy because it brings with it some measures of difficulty and even discomfort. Stakeholders regarded trust as crucial to the maintenance of a successful collaboration, firmly believing that: 'if you don't have trust, you cannot achieve much at all' (teacher A). As Fullan (2001) clearly puts it, effective leaders constantly foster purposeful interaction. Stakeholders felt a principal could seal a school's effectiveness through the development of leadership practices which encourage trust. Stakeholders recognized how interconnected and interrelated relationships were in ensuring the improvement and maintenance of the high standards of the school. They emphasized that it was the principal's responsibility to ensure this kind of school culture continued to flourish through maintaining a climate of trust between each of the stakeholders.

Although it is important for schools to have quality teachers and resources, commitment and dedication of key stakeholders and systematic collaboration between them and the school leaders are the true measures of school effectiveness. It is the school principal who is responsible for leading and guaranteeing these. How principals communicate their vision and relates with stakeholders is crucial in their ability to carry out their responsibilities effectively. In discovering what key stakeholders understand about effective school leadership and the roles and responsibilities they expect principals to play, principals are able to gain greater insight into how best to do their job.

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