Independent voices

Reflections on the current leadership approach of independent-school headteachers in England and Australia

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1. Introduction

The study was part of the international research associates programme of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL).

It sought to review the leadership and management role of headteachers in the independent sector. In doing so, it used a cross-national perspective, looking at those leaders both in England and Australia. The general term for leaders within the state sector in England is headteacher, but the independent sector still retains the gender-specific titles of headmaster and headmistress. In Australia, the term most commonly used within the state and independent sector is principal; we shall use this as the generic term for English and Australian leaders.

We would support the view taken by Bush & Glover (p10) in their review of the leadership literature for NCSL in defining leadership as "a process of influence leading to the achievement of desired purposes. It involves inspiring and supporting others towards the achievement of a vision for the school which is based on clear personal and professional values". We believe that there would not be any difference between state and independent principals in agreeing on that definition nor between Australian and English principals. However, if the details of the structure of leadership areas were broken down, we believe that significant differences may emerge.

Ken Leithwood, in his report, 'What we already know about successful school leadership' (which is available in summary form from NCSL), develops a working conception of school leadership. Two of his five points provide, in themselves, a definition of school leadership: leadership involves purpose and direction, and leadership is an influence process. One further point is significant for this study: Leithwood states that: "Leadership is contextual and contingent." By this he means:

> Most contemporary theories of leadership suggest that leadership cannot
> be separated from the context in which leadership is exerted. Leadership
> is contingent on the setting, the nature of the social organisation, the
> goals being pursued, the individuals involved, resources and timeframes
> and many other factors (p 9)

We put forward the view that leadership in independent schools may operate in a context that is different from that of state schools and is contingent on a specific number of factors unique to that sector. To see if there are any notable factors in play, we interviewed a set of leaders in each country.

The research project interviewed 10 leading principals of independent schools in England and 10 in Australia. A semi-structured interview schedule was established to provide a framework for a series of strategic conversations with the principals. The main headings for these conversations were:

1. The operational and strategic role of the principal
2. Differences in leading in state and independent schools
3. Organisational structure – in terms of leadership and management
4. Staff development approaches
5. The core purpose of schools: teaching and learning approaches
6. Accountability
7. Challenges the schools face in the future

The purpose of the interview and of the subsequent data analysis was not to provide a definitive account of leadership differences between the two sectors, but to highlight insights that would provide a framework for a leadership dialogue.

2. The context of the independent sector in England and Australia

The context of the independent sector in England and Australia is different. In England, the independent sector takes a relatively small number of students (eight per cent) and the Roman Catholic school sector is part of the maintained school sector. In our research area of Melbourne (Victoria) 34 per cent of students attend the independent sector (which include Roman Catholic schools). What differentiates Australian independent schools is that they all receive a degree of commonwealth and state government funding. The funding formula is determined by the school's socio-economic status (SES); a score ascertained by the parent body's postcode and calculated household income. The SES score then determines the level of funding provided by government and varies significantly: from 20 per cent of funding for the most exclusive schools to 80 per cent for those schools with low SES scores. The amount of funding is calculated as a percentage of the average government school recurrent cost (AGSRC) per student. The trend in the last decade has been for more parents to send their children to non-government schools; as a consequence there has been a significant increase in the number of new low-fee independent schools opened in the last decade throughout the country. The independent sector in Australia, therefore, is less elitist than in England, though more stratified, as it caters for families from a broader socio-economic spectrum. The Australian schools selected for this study were those which received the least amount of government funding and are most akin, therefore, to the independent schools in England.

3. The operational and strategic role of the principal

Principals in independent schools in both England and Australia are facing significant changes in their role. They are expected to lead and manage large and complex businesses at the same time as fulfilling the traditional expectations of parents that a principal should know every student in his or her care. Some of the tensions between these expectations, together with the influence of the corporate world, are combining to force principals to review their role within their school.

Frost argues that contemporary school leadership is best illuminated though the three key terms of values, vision and strategy:

> The exercise of leadership rests on the clarification of values and the articulation of a vision underpinned by those values...In addition, the exercise of leadership necessarily entails strategic action intended to realise those values in practice and narrow the gap between that vision and the current reality of professional practice (p 3).

Independent school principals felt significant pressure continually to clarify school values and provide a vision for the future. One English principal spoke about "defining the vision of the institution...and moving [staff] in a common direction"; another referred to this dimension as "cultural leadership", building a common set of values, which act to provide staff with a connection at a deeper level within the organisation.

One of the key findings to emerge from the data was the variation in the nature of the role of the principal. In the first instance, principals in independent schools differentiate themselves from their government counterparts in terms of accountability because of the expectations of fee-paying parents and traditions which have been established over long periods of time. Accountability to parents (often expressed in terms of results) and governors, fiscal responsibility, admissions and full enrolments, building and fundraising, legal and business decisions were the key differentiators for independent school principals when discussing differences from government school heads. There was a strong reference to corporate terminology according to which the modern principal is more like a chief executive officer than a traditional principal.

While there were cross-sectoral differences in the role of principals, other distinctions arose between the independent sector in England and Australia. Each principal was acutely aware of the need to be strategic and provide a vision for the school, but clear distinctions arose on an operational level – the degree to which the principal became involved in the daily operations of the school. Where principals involved themselves in daily organisational tasks, they perceived that they were under enormous pressure to provide both operational leadership, and this would, in turn, militate against effective future planning and strategic operations.

Principals in independent schools in England were more likely to be involved in the daily operations of the school than their Australian counterparts. They described their roles as dealing with "day-to-day administration", "supporting school activities", "to know all students...and staff" and to be available for parents. Almost all of the principals of UK schools were still involved in classroom teaching; this was not true of any Australian school principal who was interviewed. Here is how some of the principals described their roles:

And it's also the constant pressure of feeling I need to be out there with the girls - they must see me; they must have a bit of me; I must have open house - have lunches for them; I must teach them; I must give them time; I mustn't make them feel I am a distant figure...I teach all the Year 7s, so I spend all of Monday teaching. (English principal)

What have I done today? Got up, saw one or two people between 7.45 am and 8.15 am, saw one or two naughty boys, went to chapel, saw a master... Went and taught a lesson, answered probably about four or five letters, something like that, saw the architect ... and later on I am going... to a Greek play tonight. Actually [that's] quite a typical day; you just need to multiply that by six to give you the shape of the week. (English principal)

I am very hands-on, which might or might not be a good thing. I like to know for myself what is going on so, if a report will come in to somebody about something that they have been doing – a girl, a parent, a member of staff, it doesn't really matter – which gives me concern, I will see if I can talk to them about it - I just like to know what is going on. (English principal)

One of the effects of functioning at the operational level is that the strategic operations of the school are then subordinate to the pressure of daily busyness. One English principal suggested that the role was complicated by having to think and plan strategically. Another principal commented that articulating a vision and working strategically were reduced to "things I fit in around what happens during the day". The press of daily operational considerations for another principal meant that:

There is absolutely no possibility of thinking strategically. I only think strategically when I am out of the school and...the reason I don't think strategically when I am here is because I find the press of the emails, people and letters so great that it is constantly interrupting and doesn't provide the correct sort of environment in which to stand back and think about things. (English principal)

Because strategic planning was often pushed out by operational matters, this meant that it received less attention and was not done with a longer-term view (eg there would be an annual rewrite rather than looking further ahead). As one principal noted:

I mean, I have obviously written a strategic plan; I have written a management plan; I have written an estate strategy - these things are updated by me every year and they are rubber-stamped by the governors, which is fine. (English principal)

Another phenomenon which arose in some of the English schools was a belief that some schools with long-standing successful traditions were less in need of strategic planning; that if it isn't broken, don't fix it. One principal observed:

I have been one who adjusts and who nudges things forward in response to circumstances at the time, rather than one who appears a visionary committed to change and to enormous innovation... Sometimes one likens a place like this to an ocean-going liner: you can't change its direction in a hurry because, actually, it arguably is moving forward well, and as one of the governors...was always saying: "If it's not broke don't fix it." (English principal)

Another English principal commented that the future of the school was driven more by market forces – parents making choices – than by the principal and governors defining a strategic approach for the future of the school:

> So those decisions are taken for me really by market forces, and you know the only reason we have remained a full boarding school - all boys, which is, if you like, the least fashionable end of the market – is because we have successfully marketed ourselves at all of the limited number of parents who are interested in that form of education. (English principal)

In Australia, by contrast, most principals of independent schools are less likely to be involved in the day-to-day operations of the school and are more likely to be involved in the strategic direction, fund-raising and promotional aspects of the role. Some of the factors which have led to this approach include the size of some of the independent schools (for example, multi-campus schools with student populations in excess of 2,000), the highly competitive nature of the independent sector and the increasingly important need to attract financial support for the operation of the school to supplement government funding and minimise fee increases.

One of the consequences of this shift in role description has been that principals have needed to empower staff in senior and middle-management roles to assume more responsibility for the daily operations of the school. Distributed leadership is very much uppermost in the minds of two Australian principals who argue:

> What I hope I do and what I believe I should be doing are really empowering a lot of people around me to be leaders with me. Now I am talking students, I am talking staff, I am also talking parents, because we have so many parent bodies, and schools like ours don't work without the parents. And obviously my colleagues, my management team, everybody. (Australian principal)

> Perhaps my greatest role is to understand what the school does and then gather round me the best people to lead in each aspect of the school. And I much prefer to find the right person to do the job and let them lead within our broad school vision, than actually to be acting like a control freak and thinking I could lead and manage every single aspect of the school. It's not possible. (Australian principal)

The pressures facing schools are great, and perhaps the greatest evidence of change is occurring in the traditional role of the principal. We see more evidence of change in Australia, but the awareness of increasing and competing demands on UK principals is likely to result in considerable redefinition of their role in the immediate future. Their preparation for change and ability to respond flexibly may be limited by fewer opportunities to share collegially and the fact that fewer principals in the independent sector in England had leadership training (other than on-the-job) or higher degrees. This is explored further, below.

4. Differences in leading in state and independent schools

This is a particularly difficult area to analyse. About 20 per cent of the principals had worked in both sectors, while others relied on conversations and networking with their state-school colleagues to make comparisons. The principals highlighted four areas where they thought there was a significant difference between the two sectors. These were:

- the freedom of action they perceived they had
- organisational culture
- the level of resourcing
- market forces

Freedom from government initiatives and requirements was seen as a major benefit of working in the independent sector. While the independent principals were obviously working within the context of what was happening in the state sector, it was the absence of bureaucratic control and detail that they welcomed. This was highlighted by two principals:

> One big one is that all state schools are now committed to teacher assessments related to performance-related pay, which is a bit of a nightmare, because they have to assess a high proportion of their staff every year to see whether they should be paid more on a performance scale, and I'm glad I don't have to do that; and secondly they are committed to do the national curriculum and so they have to teach certain subjects which we don't have to. They have to take statutory tests at the ages of 7, 11 and 14, which we don't have to worry about, and they have, of course, to operate to a large extent through the local authority, and that's bad then. So they are not as free, of course, to operate as I am. I mean, I can do more or less anything I like really, as long as I feel the governors will permit me to do it. (English principal)

> But I think one of the major differences for me, as an independent school head, is that I really am the chief executive officer of the business, so along with all of that - there are so many personalities to deal with, so many legal issues to deal with - the site is my responsibility, the building on the site is my responsibility, also full admissions, so you have got responsibility for the income because that is your marketing, your PR; recruiting is your responsibility, because that is your income; and then actually the expenditure is also your responsibility, so deciding on the level of staffing; there are all sorts of departments; the priorities for expenditure are also your responsibility, and that is a really huge task and sometimes, sometimes, I think I have moved so far away from what I started doing, which was teaching. (English principal)

In terms of organisational culture the principals articulated a number of powerful factors. First, and most significant, parents and students had to buy into the culture and values of the school. If they did not, then the school did not have to take them; if they failed to abide by the school's values, they could be asked to leave. This positive choice by parents and the control over entry by the school constitute a major difference between the two sectors. As such, independent schools were able to select pupils who both supported and enhanced their school culture, as one principal stated:

Parents know what they are signing up to and what we expect. It gets everyone onside right at the start of the child's education. We offer an enormous range of activities and we are keenly interested in the development of each child. We have staff assigned to each student. We want a culture of support at all levels and at all times. (Australian principal).

This is in marked contrast to state schools, which take all children from a delineated catchment area.

The ability to charge fees and well-established financial resources through donations certainly enhance the resource provision of independent schools. The ability to spend money on teachers for smaller classes and the ability to buy the latest technology and equipment were seen as major advantages in the independent sector. As one principal put it:

> We provide a very physically pleasing and well resourced environment. If you walk around, it's a beautiful school. You want to come into it – it's lovely. It's well resourced, and we really try hard to provide the best. Our resourcing is certainly better than our state-school colleagues. (Australian principal)

Market forces were seen as a significant pressure by independent school principals. They recognised that parents paying fees were conscious that they were consumers with a right to expect high-quality education and were prepared to move if they did not receive it. Thus marketing and responsiveness to parents were seen as major factors in independent schools. While they recognised that these factors were also significant in state schools, they highlighted the greater demands made on independent schools. This was articulated by one principal as:

> We have to fill the school, and it has to be popular, and we want to be a bit selective and so we have got to have a decent number of applicants, so I am very interested in what parents want, and I don't particularly care whether this school remains a boarding school or not, whether it takes boys or not, because I think that I could make it a good school whether it was single-sex or co-educational or whatever. So those decisions are taken for me really by market forces, and the only reason we have remained a full boarding school – all boys – is because we have successfully marketed ourselves, and for all of the limited number of parents who are interested in that form of education, we are obviously amongst the most popular schools in Britain. (English principal)

While principals in both sectors can outline their particular demands, this is an interesting section of "independent voices".

5. Organisational structure – in terms of leadership and management

Some educational bodies have been inclined, in recent years, to adopt some of the trends and practices coming out of the corporate or business world. In some respects, these changes have occurred at the organisational and the leadership levels. For example, flatter management structures were a reasonably common phenomenon in organisations in the 1990s. Despite this, it is probably true to say that organisational and management structures have remained more traditional in the English independent-school sector than in Australia.

The traditional configuration in school leadership has been to have a principal who has oversight of the whole school's operations, a deputy who has either operational day-to-day responsibilities (sometimes combined with pastoral duties, particularly in boarding schools) and then a person with curriculum responsibility. Two of the English principals describe their leadership structure thus:

> I have one principal deputy, ... who is responsible for health and safety, monitoring the activities programme and the dining hall and one or two other things as well... Next, there is the director of studies, who... manages the curriculum and the administration of the timetable and then, thirdly, very important, the director of boarding, who is responsible for the boarding houses and all pastoral care. So these are three key people. (English principal)

> The deputy head is genuinely my right-hand man, and I will talk to him about all the affairs of state and endeavour to make sure that he was briefed in order to take over if necessary... and he deals with liaison with our feeder schools, the interview and selection of candidates, ... making staff appointments and boys who wish to come. And the senior tutor...manages the tutorial system and discipline, if it needs to escalate up to that level. And the director of studies manages all academic and curricular matters and spends much of his time talking to and negotiating with and managing heads of the academic departments. (English principal)

While these schools have quite traditional roles for their senior staff, the one common addition has been to include either a bursar or development officer as part of the management team. The increasing complexity of the business operations and their close affinity with educational programmes has meant that commercial reality needs to be part of management team capability. Similarly, the increasing expense of independent schooling and some uncertainty (particularly in Australia) of continuing funding have meant that schools are looking for alternative income streams, particularly when it comes to the funding of buildings and facilities which cannot be funded from the normal fee-based revenue. The need for a development officer or team has become an increasing priority for school principals and is now reflected in their management structure.

The proliferation of organisational duties has resulted in most schools instituting second-tier teams, which may manage a subsection of the school or a particular aspect of the school's programme. These positions have created significant career opportunities for staff to have experience in middle-management roles. Generally, these teams have line-management accountability to a member of the senior

management or executive team, and thus the school's structure continues to perpetuate the hierarchical model.

One change noted by several principals was that they have elevated the status of the role of curriculum leadership in one of two ways, either by creating a second deputy's position and tagging that as curriculum or by restructuring and redefining the role of deputy to that of curriculum leadership. This is a powerful symbol in terms of what the school values. One principal described the change he had implemented:

> ... my first deputy head – I changed his role 4 years ago – to actually look at quality management in terms of teaching and learning, and that's his main role. So I have taken all the baggage away from this traditional deputy-head role – you know, making sure registers are taken and ordering stock and that kind of thing. His role is to work very closely with teachers throughout the organisation, to share good practice, to actually have peer mentoring, to actually develop information technology (IT) within the curriculum. (English principal)

Some Australian schools, which are large by comparison with many independent schools in England, have adopted flatter management models, at times with no designated deputy-principal roles. For example, a large independent Australian girls' school is organised thus:

> I have a big college management team and, because we are a large organisation, I probably have more people in specialist roles than others, who might do a whole lot more hands-on things than I do... We have four heads of schools, and each of those heads of schools runs a very big school and they run it autonomously... with a director of corporate services (who gets all my business side covered in terms of admissions and marketing). I also have a development officer and the senior chaplain. (Australian principal)

Another large, multi-campus school has an executive management team of seven members, including the principal. Each of the three heads of campus, plus the head of curriculum, business manager and associate to the principal represent the composition of the team; each of these team members has a team for whom they are responsible in each area of the school.

Despite the language of flatter management structures – and some of the discourse from principals would suggest appropriation of this thinking – schools in the independent sector have remained largely impervious to this particular trend. While there may be some indication of flatter structures, there is, rather, an increase in the layers of management together with a proliferation in the number of positions of responsibility. The most common paradigm, therefore, of school structure and organisation has remained reasonably constant. There seems little evidence in the independent-school sector in either country of this changing in the immediate future

6. Staff development approaches

One of the indicators of how leaders approach the core business of teaching and learning is the support offered to staff in terms of their professional development. The interviews revealed two distinct approaches: the summative and the formative. By summative, we are referring to the evaluation of teacher performance in relation to their classroom performance; and by formative, we are referring to those developmental activities which were adopted to further the professional growth of teachers.

Most schools had in place some form of evaluation or teacher appraisal, most often a system designed to assess the effectiveness of classroom practitioners through a competency-based model of evaluation which usually involved some form of peer or line-manager assessment. Independent schools are, of course, free to determine their own system of staff appraisal, and there was a huge variety in approaches, usually described as home-grown schemes. Accountability in the independent-school sector is closely aligned to parents (as fee-paying stakeholders) and governors (as custodians of the long-term survival of the business enterprise), and both groups are keen to ensure that teachers within the school are held to account for their professional skills and educational outcomes. One English principal described his approach to appraisal, which was reasonably typical of the models existing in many independent schools in both England and Australia:

> We have a staff appraisal system, which was home-grown ... involves fairly elaborate interview and classroom observation and so on every three years. It's all written down and involves interviews with the head of department, with my deputy and with me. (English principal)

Most of these appraisal schemes are geared to goal setting and identifying strengths and weaknesses, and providing professional development in those areas where it is found to be necessary. These links are clearly designed to move towards an integration of professional growth into the models. Effective appraisal schemes will usually separate the summative from the formative, and two Australian schools have begun to build complex performance-management schemes so as to accommodate the accountability requirements of parents and governors, and the individual professional needs of the teachers.

In both of these schools there is a three-tier or staged programme. The first stage is the teacher-competency level, where teachers are assessed for performance skills, competencies and organisational fit. The second tier is the formative, developmental tier, where individual staff members select a pathway appropriate to their own professional needs, as determined by themselves or with the aid of a critical friend. In this model, both schools are avoiding the one-size-fits-all approach of many performance-management schemes. For example, it might be possible for staff to identify their professional development needs for the following 12 months and select an appropriate strategy: it might be a work-based project, an individual plan, or even a study or research model. In making choices available to staff, the schools are attempting to find appropriate ways for individuals to make a contribution to the goals of the school as well as meeting their individual needs. One of the Australian principals involved in this model noted that the school was:

> willing to offer to support people on personal projects as well as professional projects, and everyone gets a small amount of personal professional development (PD) money that they can use for something that's important to

them, as well as being in line with the strategic directions of the college. (Australian principal)

The third tier of these programmes links with the work of the national professional associations to define and chronicle the ways in which exemplary practitioners work. These schemes represent a way to certify teachers whose skills are exemplary and then are able to provide a performance-related component to salary. At this level, teachers are recognised and rewarded for their demonstrable professional skills. The most common themes in professional-development programmes were subject training and whole-school issues such as pastoral care or generic issues. The most common paradigm was that of professional development occurring outside the school (something that staff went to), and offered to all staff within a particular faculty or discipline, where they are encouraged to do courses. One principal described his programme thus:

> My deputy holds a whole-school budget, which is in addition to departmental training budgets, and his task is to identify courses on whole-school issues such as pastoral care, or health and safety, or how to run a boarding house, or it could be financial management. (English principal)

Overall, significant and increasing funds were made available for courses or programmes. Another principal observed that there is "an expectation of all members of staff that... they develop themselves professionally". Where schools saw themselves as learning communities, there appeared to be greater emphasis given to the needs of the individual plus the needs of the organisation. The principals of these schools often observed that: "We learn a lot together" or "We are really about learning together" – with a strong sense of building a collaborative and professional environment. One principal described her support for staff:

> Bring an idea, bring any idea that you believe will be good for the children and good for the learning of children and we will not say no. We will do whatever we can to be creative with an idea, if you give the resources that can develop an idea and get on with it – something that is good for the children, for their learning, for their growth, for their development. (English principal)

Another Australian school had moved professional development more in-house, where staff were working on projects and then sharing these with other members of the school community. The principal noted that:

> Each faculty has to come up with a national research project as a faculty working together, and we had something like 150 projects working around the college and then we showcased them. So we did things like – we have twice-a-year technology days, where we have fifteen-minute demonstrations by just a classroom teacher. (Australian principal)

Several schools offered a more personalised approach to professional growth and supported staff with scholarships and grants; for example, one scholarship type was for international projects and another was used to support innovative approaches to professional development. In most Australian independent schools, staff who wished to study part-time were also supported through bursaries and fee-payment support.

A related phenomenon is the development of staff for promotional purposes. While the data here is less consistent, there was nonetheless some difference in the way that principals approached promotional issues. The most common approach in England was the learn-on-the-job approach, where the principal would identify a

prospective leader and mentor that person. One English principal observed that: "It's rather amazing how many people become heads without having had any significant training course... The best training I had, without a doubt, was... working for someone and seeing how he operates day to day." Another principal ensured that the deputies are given training in every aspect of the job, so they are prepared for possible promotion. The situation in Australian independent schools is quite different: there is an expectation that principals will have a postgraduate degree, and many have doctoral-level degrees. The expectation is that future leaders will have undertaken both study and selected professional development in the area of school leadership. This applies not only to the role of principal, but also to those seeking promotion to middle-level leadership roles. This particular criterion is normally listed by schools as an essential criterion for selection.

Professional development of staff reflects the imperative that schools need to develop both educators and leaders, and ensure that they have skills and expertise which are constantly and continuously upgraded. The demands for quality and targeted professional development have also meant that schools have needed to devote increasing resources to staff development at all levels.

7. The core purpose of schools: teaching and learning approaches

In the past decade there has been a movement towards placing greater emphasis on the educational leadership of the principal. This trend acknowledges the importance of the core purpose of schooling and the nexus between educational leadership and improved student-learning outcomes.

In Australia, independent schools are at the forefront of educational innovation, with developments in teaching and learning, direct links to and participation in research, and increasing the status of teaching and learning roles within the organisational structure. The role of the principal as educational leader has been pivotal, indeed the driving force, in these schools in articulating the vision, putting in place the support infrastructure, and driving the change agenda. In part, these changes have been made possible by the autonomy of the independent-school principal, who has greater flexibility to manage resources and to apportion funds for specific learning initiatives; some have been made possible by strategic commercial partnerships.

For example, one independent girls' school in Victoria has been a world leader in the use of notebook computers for individual students since 1990. The vision was driven by the then principal and has been further enhanced by the current principal. The school is now acknowledged as one of the Australian leaders in the integrated use of technology to enhance learning and has moved beyond the preoccupation with functional and programmatic use of notebook computers to the development of its own online learning system, which supports developments in teaching and learning. The school continues to respond to changes and growth in our understanding of learning and learners, incorporating learning styles and multiple intelligences into the online delivery system, and has moved beyond focusing on how to use the technology to a point where the technology is deployed to enhance student learning, not just support it.

The principal of one of Australia's leading independent boys' schools has made a concerted effort to raise the profile of improving teaching within the organisation, despite its very traditional support base. He noted:

> We have taken the keenest of interests now in casting off what was the traditional mould of [the school] – conservative, reactionary, defensive etc, - and are really trying to incorporate the best that we can find regarding teaching and learning... We have looked at research and incorporated quite a bit of the best theory in terms of how people learn... We in the teaching profession now, I think, have a phenomenal responsibility to actually find out how kids learn in the best way and to individually tie up how we go about things to appeal to their mode of learning. (Australian principal)

Another of Australia's independent schools is in the process of establishing a research institute within the school structure. The vision, driven by the principal, is to create a working relationship between research, teaching practice and curriculum. The school's view is that:

> As we grow in our understanding of learners and learning (research), we are then able to adjust our educational programme (the curriculum), improve teaching practice (staff development), so that our educational offering better meets the needs of students. We are, therefore, continually reviewing what

we know about our students, our everyday teaching practice and the best way to organise student learning. (Director of Research)

In this school, and in a number of innovative independent schools, the role associated with teaching and learning has been elevated in status, most often to the level of deputy principal, thereby reinforcing the importance of the core purpose of schools as being the teaching and learning programme.

By contrast, independent schools in England have largely maintained traditional methods of teaching and learning which have been successful over time. These schools are not seen to be at the forefront of educational innovation and development.

One of the factors attributed to the maintenance of traditional teaching approaches and methodologies is the relative success of these over a long period of time, given the ability levels of the student cohort. The view of the principal in relation to change and the imperative to modify traditional practice clearly impact on the degree of change within the school. As one principal observed:

> I am not pushing it that hard because some of those who are least interested in the new technology are outstandingly good classroom practitioners, so there is no great reason why they should have to change, and in fact they are already doing a very good job. (English principal)

And another English principal commented on the relative complacency of the institution:

> I think that an observer, a critical observer, might suggest that there has been some complacency here derived from the fact that, actually, we are an academically very selective school – the boys are all pretty bright – and traditional methods, combined with innovation in IT and the new textbooks and course materials which are available, have been sufficient for enthusiastic teachers who communicate well and are keen to get it right to develop themselves without a great deal of external stimulus. (English principal)

Another factor militating against changes related to pedagogy is a degree of scepticism about fashionable trends such as multiple intelligence and learning styles. This scepticism appears to be embedded within the institution, even including the parent body. When discussing multiple intelligence, one principal observed that:

> People are pretty sceptical about that type of thing in the independent sector, and you know we have had people leading whole school insets on that, but we have to be especially careful here of not using what they think of as pseudo-psychology... That goes down very badly here. (English principal)

In a similar vein, another principal felt that emotional intelligence was something about which schools have an intuitive understanding and that that understanding is something that is built into the pastoral programme rather than part of the armoury of skills of the classroom teacher. He concluded that: "We didn't need Daniel Goleman to tell us about emotional intelligence."

Another principal shared this view and noted that:

> I don't think there is a formal recognition of emotional intelligence, but we have a very, very strong pastoral system here, which I suppose is an informal recognition of just that... But I don't think we have done anything formally about that sort of thing. (English principal)

Perhaps the area in which there was evidence of change was in the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the clear nexus between the effective integration of learning technologies into the teaching programme of the school; and our data would appear to support this view. For some principals in the English independent schools, the advent of ICT was viewed as inevitable, ie the school needed to demonstrate that it had embraced the modern technology into the educational programme. Where principals had little understanding of the capacity of learning technologies to enhance learning, the type of use was more likely to focus on supporting traditional pedagogies.

This type of response is evident when descriptions of the use of ICT focus on the availability of hardware: for example, "Every teacher now has access to a computer and a computer projector" and is able to use the intranet "to store materials for use in lessons". At times, the recognition that ICT needed to be incorporated into the programme found its way into policy directives: for example, "Every department is required to have one member of staff who takes a particular interest in ICT" and is expected to demonstrate where ICT is being used within the programme. But as one English principal noted, the level of use tends to focus on particular software and "teaching boys how to use databases and spreadsheets" rather than a fully integrated use of the technology into the learning programme. Where the principal demonstrated less understanding of the use of ICT, the level of staff take-up seemed to be lower; as one principal noted, ICT use "only just started in the last 2 or 3 years" and another observed that: "We are probably slightly on the slower side than we should be in incorporating [ICT] into our teaching."

However, there were principals who were leading the educational imperative to use ICT effectively and had put in place clear guidelines for staff development and training in the use of ICT to support learning. One principal described her approach:

> We have an ongoing focus on ICT... because [if] we want to use it more and more in the classroom, we have to continue to build up the skills of the teachers, because without the requisite skills for the use of the technology in the classroom, it doesn't enhance learning. I embrace the technology, provided that it adds to learning – it isn't there just for filing... So, rather than putting technology development first and then just having it sit there till people can use it, we have put in technology when people are ready to use it. (English principal)

Another principal developed policies around the integration of technology and had a vision "to actually develop IT within the curriculum" and created a curriculum position within the school to support staff training and really move things forward at some pace.

Principals, while involved in the operational and strategic dimensions of the school, are less involved with the shifts and changes in our understanding of the learner, teaching and the learning environment, particularly in England. Australian principals, given the capacity to respond flexibly and the freedom to innovate, are more likely to

be leading the educational agenda and introducing contemporary ideas into the teaching and learning programmes. In Australia, this has led to an expectation that principals in the independent sector will not only be able to manage the complex financial and operational demands of a large school, but will be at the cutting edge of educational research and practice.

8. Accountability

Independent schools have two forms of accountability, which are probably drawn into sharper focus than in the state sector. First, there is market accountability, in that they depend directly on parents paying high fees and this increases parental demands and, second, accountability derives indirectly from the inspection processes.

Certainly the most powerful driver of accountability is the fee-paying market, variously described by principals as parents, current students and former students. The decisions and choices made by parents vis-a-vis their children's education has a significant impact on the viability of independent schools. While this might appear to be a stronger driving force in England, where there is no government funding for independent schools, it is nonetheless very powerful in Australia, where there is considerable competition between independent schools (at the high-fee end) vying for a comparatively small niche market. Several principals noted the importance of the parents as the group to whom they were most directly accountable:

> To the parents really and in a secondary sense to the girls, but you know the parents pay for the girls' education... I have always seen the parents as the people to whom I am accountable. (English principal)

> I feel very strongly that I am accountable to the parents... It's a financial investment and it's a great trust to send their son here for 5 or 7 years and I think that we must be open [to them], by airing some of their concerns and by asking questions. (English principal)

One of the problems identified by some principals in both England and Australia was the increasing incidence of parents who wish to apply pressure on the school for a particular type of education or who seek to affect results because of the fees which are being paid. One Australian principal commented that this phenomenon:

> does make life a little difficult sometimes – some have come and said if you don't do so and so, I will take my daughter away, and I have to consider whether they take their daughter away or what they are asking is reasonable. (Australian principal)

Other principals observed this phenomenon, and its increasing prevalence, and the need to find a way to work with and educate parents about the role of the school. It was noted:

> There are some [parents] who are very difficult and very demanding – they want the best for their child, but they are not always looking at the whole picture. And I think within all of this there has got to be that trust, that actually we are the professionals and we are going to give it our best shot and we are actually going to give the child the best opportunities; but they have to look at the whole picture and how best we can go forward with this. (English principal)

> The parents have a particular focus on a particular individual child – to hell with everyone else – the rest of the school could fall off a cliff as long as their child is zooming along at full pace. We, I guess, are ultimately accountable to them through the fact that we need their involvement, and it's not to say that what you do in a school is geared entirely to making sure enrolments are full,

but it does add a layer of difficulty to the accountability when you are trying to talk in an institutional way, when what they are interested in in accountability is what it means for their individual child – because they don't always see the big picture. (Australian principal)

The parents who are much more involved – they are paying big bucks and they want a little bit of a decision and then we have to be very, very firm in letting them know what the lines of communication are… Just because you pay, doesn't mean that you are right – we will work out an answer together. (Australian principal)

The other major form of accountability for independent schools is to the government, which is responsible for education. In Australia, with a federal system of government, education is the responsibility of state governments. Accountability to government for independent schools is in the form of a five-yearly assessment by the Registered Schools Board. This Board (or its equivalent in each state) has responsibility for assessing an individual school's curriculum, compliance with state regulations regarding health and safety, etc., staff training and professional status, facilities and structures. The Board, in turn, makes recommendations for schools to implement within a specific timeframe.

Given the current arrangements vis-à-vis government funding, there is a movement towards increasing the demands on independent schools to be accountable to the government for the funds they receive. At present, independent schools are not bound by state curriculum or industrial agreements, and there are members of the community who believe that schools in receipt of government funding should be more accountable for the deployment of those funds.

In England, schools are independent of government direct grants, but they do benefit, indirectly, from charitable status. However, public policy as regards charitable status is changing, which will make independent schools more accountable in future, as will Ofsted.

9. Challenges the schools face in the future

The change phenomenon is a ubiquitous part of contemporary life, as much for individuals as for institutions. Schools have been expected to make changes on a number of fronts, and the demands for change have not lessened – if anything, they have increased. Independent schools have not been inured to this phenomenon and have had to adapt to new circumstances and changes in society, including technology and changes in family arrangements. We asked the principals in both countries to identify the issues which they see as presenting the most challenge in the foreseeable future.

A number of principals, in both countries, identified the problem of attracting and retaining good staff, particularly when salaries for teachers are still considered to be average or below average. This problem is particularly acute for traditional boarding schools where staff are often expected to work seven days a week during term. The appeal for younger people is much less than it was for previous generations. In England, not only is there a problem attracting staff, but some independent schools in expensive locations find it difficult to attract staff owing to the relative costs of living near the school. Some schools have responded by providing accommodation on the school grounds or subsidised rent near the school. Either way, the increasing cost of providing competitive conditions for staff is a factor which adds to the escalating costs for independent schools and remains an important challenge for the future. One English principal expressed it thus:

> Their prospects of buying their own house are negligible, unless there is family money or unless they are married to someone who works in the City. And that does cause us some concern. (English principal)

While attracting staff with subsidies and above-average salaries will help, most principals acknowledged that the pool of talented young people who are attracted to the lifestyle of teaching is small. Add to this that, while there are good young teachers around, they don't necessarily feel that they will stay in teaching for their whole career and are often leaving after five to eight years in order to pursue other career interests.

Another staffing issue identified by a number of principals was the immediate future, when there would be a significant shortfall of staff. Principals noted, as a global phenomenon, that in these schools there was a large proportion of staff who had all worked in the one place for most of their careers and were facing retirement in the next five to ten years. Apart from the difficulties of replacing large numbers of staff, there would also be problems in retaining the cultural dimensions of the school, which were, in large part, dependent on the stability of a staff who understood and transmitted the common set of values. This has the potential to change, significantly, the culture of particular independent schools, probably more so in England than in Australia, where the staff are more itinerant.

One of the key challenges facing independent schools, particularly in England and at the elite end of the market in Australia, is the affordability of this type of education in the future. Increasing competition, at least in Australia, from low-fee schools has meant that the high-fee end of the market has needed to demonstrate added value for an increasingly discriminating clientele. In both countries, principals are aware of the tenuousness of government support and the impact of government policies vis-a-vis the capacity of a small part of the population to afford this particular style of education. In England, one principal acknowledged that the school's existence may,

in the end, depend on "taxation regimes and it may depend a little bit on the attitude of the state towards independent schools like us".

In Australia, government policy in relation to tertiary education is also impacting on the capacity of parents to pay expensive school fees. In recent times, the commonwealth government's support for full-fee-paying tertiary places (a recent phenomenon in Australia) has meant that parents are now beginning to make decisions about whether to spend their disposable incomes on fewer years in an independent school plus a tertiary place, or indeed whether they will continue to support independent schooling for the main part of their child's or their children's education. If parents exercise their choice in favour of tertiary places, this will impact significantly on the viability of some independent schools, particularly in the early or primary years.

Another issue facing principals is the pressure of enrolments and the impact the student population has on the school's ability to deliver the best possible range of curricular and co-curricular programs. This goes to the heart of being able to deliver a quality education – being accountable to a fee-paying parent population. One English principal explained the link between enrolments and having the confidence to plan for the future:

> ... but to actually make sure that we are continuing to invest so that what we are actually delivering is the best that we can. And it is a numbers game as well. If you don't have the students in the school, you can't invest in the way that you want and therefore you can't drive some of those initiatives forward. (English principal)

The immediate challenges of staffing and the longer-term viability of independent schools were the most often identified of the issues facing principals. Others, however, made reference to the philosophical and pedagogical dimensions of education. One principal, for example, felt that one of the most pressing challenges was the qualities which students from the school would have when they left the school and the sort of contribution they would make as citizens. She noted that the challenge for this sort of school was in the:

> appropriate preparation of its students [so as] to play their part fully in society and... to make sure that the girls here are outward-looking enough [and that we] give them enough perspective on the outside world. (English principal)

Creating the right environment, while developing a civic responsibility and social conscience, is a key duty of the principal. Part of this duty arose from the "opportunity given to us by the current government" in terms of the school's charitable status, but also from a sense of obligation as the school was forming future leaders who "have got to play their part". Another principal felt that the charitable status meant that the school needed to give back to the community and that it was important that the school take the initiative on a number of community projects.

Other principals felt that the nature of modern education provided significant challenges for independent schools. One felt that the "rapid developments in electronic education... are going to change a lot of the ways in which schools will relate to the outside world" and the way they go about the core educational responsibilities. Another agreed and noted that the real challenge was "keeping pace with the technological demands of changes... within the way we teach"'. Others felt that the pressure to maintain academic standards was impacting on the school's

ability to provide a more holistic education for all students and, in Australia, to be at the forefront of educational thinking and practice.

In a philosophical reflection, one principal noted how the nature of teaching had changed because "kids challenge you these days; they don't accept what you are saying necessarily, and their education comes from a wide variety of sources." He concluded that: "We in the teaching profession now, I think, have a phenomenal responsibility to actually find out how kids learn in the best way and to individually tie up how we go about things to appeal to their mode of learning."

10. Conclusion

The research has shown that the eight categories for examining the roles of principals in Australia and England have provided a wealth of insights and perspectives. There were a number of similarities but also some significant differences between how principals in both countries viewed their role in comparison with their state-sector colleagues and between Australia and England. Issues of accountability were seen as common, with independent principals in both countries welcoming greater freedom of action in the independent sector, but also significant demands from market accountability. Significant differences occurred in the form of academic qualifications acquired and while in post in each country, as there were in the strategic and operational roles of the principal. There was also a noticeable difference in the focus on research and innovation, especially in regard to learning, between independent schools in each country. Emerging as common challenges for both sets of principals were the need to attract high-quality staff and the fact that the rising cost of education could deter parents from opting for independent schools. Similar and interesting dimensions of professional development were found to exist.

This was a limited study of principals in two countries. Within these limitations of scale, it does paint a rich picture of the current nature and challenges of leading in the independent sector in both countries. This report of these "independent voices" does provide some significant insights for principals in both countries to aid them in a review of their practice. It may also be of help to principals considering how their roles might develop in the state sector. We hope this report will stimulate discussion and debate.

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