Stakeholder Relationships in Schools

Peter Farrell
Faculty of Education La Trobe University & Zeerust Primary School, Victoria

Introduction
This article reports on the findings of a study into relationships among principals and stakeholders. There is little doubt that relationships with school stakeholders are very important. However, each stakeholder group can have different expectations of, and on, the principal (Cleary Gilbert, Skinner, & Dempster, 2008). In the study of interest here, eight ‘experienced’ school administrators, four TPs (teaching-principals) and four NTPs (non-teaching principals) - each group comprised of equal numbers of men and women, and all working in the Hume Region in the State of Victoria - were each engaged in a structured interview process to determine how their professional relationships impacted on either their effectiveness or ineffectiveness as leaders of their school.

Using a repertory grid technique approach to structure the conversations with principals, it became apparent that a school could be modelled as two concentric circles with the principal at the centre. Within the central circle were the principal and other school insiders where the relationship was positive, professional and personal. Outsiders were to be found beyond the external circle. Here, the relationships were dysfunctional and professional. Between the insiders and the outsiders were a more benign group where the relationship was professional.

School Outsiders
In today’s world of ever changing, external influences promulgated by media, conservative-minded legislatures and an increasingly litigious population, school administrators are expected to be a combination of bureaucrat, educational leader, community pillar, role model, surrogate parent, and moral agent as they respond to all of the school's constituents (Meyer & Macmillan, 2001).
This study suggests that experienced teaching-principals running small schools did not identify with having to deal with dysfunctional relationships as a regular part of their task set. Such constructs were seen as one-off events or as a negative relationship with a particular individual. In contrast, experienced non-teaching principals reported that handling dysfunctional stakeholder relationships was just part of the job of administering larger schools:

*You can’t delegate* when you have stuff that involves process and relationships. You are the front-person so you have to do the hard stuff. You have to get the tough stuff as right as you can. You can’t always be right but you have to be consistent (NTP).

The study also suggests that all school leaders prefer to deal with groups where they have some control over the agenda as opposed to dealing with difficult individuals. As one non-teaching principal noted, “Adults have agendas …. It goes to shit when adults are involved (NTP).” Being focussed on the maintenance of relationships is an important component of being an effective school leader; it is a professional obligation, “Negative parents get my professional but not my personal support” (NTP).

**School Insiders**

In the present study, all interviewees identified strongly with insiders at their respective schools. “I work for [my] primary school not the department so any school-based relationship is very important (TP).” In all instances the school insiders identified in this study were individuals who demonstrated a detailed and intimate understanding of the school, the departmental system, and who pro-actively supported the principal:

*This makes sense to me. These people agree with me and because I don’t have to spend time explaining and convincing people I can be more creative. When you don’t have blockers you can follow your vision. When you share values you share trust and you have loyalty which you can build on* (NTP).
It was observed that the more effective administrators dealt with insiders more than outsiders and that the nature of this relationship was positive, professional and personal. One teaching-principal noted that:

_Frequent contact with insiders means my effectiveness is improved. Your relationships within the school must be strong; the community must know what you are on about (TP)._ 

The dynamics of the relationships among principals and stakeholders are captured in the following comments:

_You want people to be part of the inner circle. You want insiders to understand the school. You want everyone to be an insider really. It’s best to have your knockers inside the tent too where you can keep an eye on ’em but if you give them an inch they’ll take a mile. I try to find them a job. It’s a bit manipulative I know. I don’t give up on them unless they have nothing to give (NTP)._ 

_People who kick up can end being your best supporters. At least you have “real” conversations with them and you have to make your case. You can’t assume that the people who just go along with you have bought into what you are doing. You need to communicate your cultural goals frequently, daily even, so it gets easier and might even come about (TP)._ 

The findings of this study suggest that the teaching-principals of smaller schools enjoyed much closer relations with their communities and that school insiders could be found among teaching staff, office staff, school councillors, most parents and students. Teaching-principals also enjoyed quite close relations with their peers:

_In small schools your staff and your peers are the two groups you work with the most. We are involved with a lot of cluster activity where we moderate student work, make plans. Our cliental are similar and we share similar cultural issues (TP)._
The findings also suggest that the leaders of larger schools seemed to work at more of a distance from staff, students, parents and peers and that the closest relationship for effective principals in these schools was the one they enjoyed with their second-in-charge.

**A special relationship – Leader and second-in-charge (2IC)**

With the increase in volume and complexity of the responsibilities devolved to schools, the importance of leading and managing a school via a leadership team has increased, as has interest in other forms of distributed or shared leadership in schools (Early & Weindling, 2004; Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003). The most obvious example of a formal leadership team is one where the school principal is supported by an assistant school leader, such as a deputy principal and has other administrative support, such as a full-time bursar. Larger schools may have additional levels of leadership and management available such as curriculum and year-level coordinators and/or leading teachers appointed to oversee a particular aspect of school operations.

Irrespective of the size of the schools in this study, all the interviewees identified, either directly or indirectly, the importance of their relationship with their immediate subordinate, leading to the conclusion that all school principals could benefit from selecting a second-in-charge for the school. This is the case even where this person may not be immediately obvious, e.g. the school may not have an assistant or deputy principal or leading teacher, because the professional relationship with this person was found to be a mechanism by which school administrators fostered culture in their school (Schein, 1992). Torrington and Weightman (1993) note, however, that what is possible depends on who you have on your staff. One non-teaching principal noted that:

*These people are part of the leadership-management team. We always tease the issues out amongst ourselves and make sure we are on the same page before taking it to the rest of the staff. It takes time (NTP).*

On the other hand, a teaching-principal observed that:
Planning is one of those things that should be shared but due to circumstances I did most of the planning. Other staff had input but it depends on your fractional time teacher; who they are. You have to make the best of it because of our remoteness there wasn’t a lot of choice. It can put constraints on you (TP).

It would seem that all schools, irrespective of size, should ensure that relevant training in how to be an effective second-in-charge is made available to the person selected to fulfil this role. This would be a fruitful way for regional offices to enhance leadership capacity in schools.

**Effective leadership and stakeholder relations**

In the study discussed here, effective leaders were found to enjoy more frequent positive, personal and professional relationships with their communities. It was noted that the experienced leaders of small schools tended to enjoy closer relations with all the stakeholder groups at their school, whereas the main relationship for the administrators of larger schools was the one with an immediate subordinate.

Some might believe that dealing with argumentative staff, fractured school councils, misbehaving students and irrational parents is the price principals pay for being in charge. Some might see it as just part of the job. However, most principals in this study resented the need to engage in such behaviours and argued that it took away valuable creative space, as well as taking the focus off students and their education (Collard, 2004). Improving the quality of stakeholder relations is a key issue for system managers and school leaders.

**Acknowledgements**

This paper arises from doctoral research carried out under the supervision of Professor Lorraine Ling and Doctor Caroline Walta of the Faculty of Education at La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia.
REFERENCES


