Leadership for School Improvement: Principals' and Teachers Perspectives, 7(3)

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Abstract

Increasingly, researchers are examining the role of leadership in implementing and sustaining school improvement. Even though scholarly and professional journals contain arguments that claim leadership is a critical factor in successful school improvement, there is a relative absence of research that documents the ways in which principals and teachers perceive leadership and understand its relationship to school improvement. The case study reported on here was part of a larger study that examined educators' perspectives of leadership and school improvement. The general research question guiding this investigation was, How do principals and teachers in secondary schools involved in school improvement construct the concept and practice of leadership? To carry out this investigation, the authors adopted a constructivist leadership research orientation. The case study examined in this article was conducted within a secondary school that had been involved in a formal school improvement network over a 10-year period. Included here is an overview of the case study, and a discussion that draws on these key findings: (i) leading in school improvement is a responsibility shared by principals and teachers; (ii) varied sources of leadership, including teacher leadership, are required to improve schooling; (iii) involvement of external agencies in school improvement is problematic; and (iv) continuous professional development of educators is critical to sustaining school success. In concluding, we urge researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to consider ways in which emergent perspectives of school leadership might address issues related to the shortage of resources and expertise required to sustain school development and success.

Emergent Perspectives of School Leadership

Although there is a lack of consensus within the field of organizational study around the definition of leadership, scholars (Bass, 1981; Burns, 1978; Rost, 1991) who have conducted extensive reviews of the literature concur that most definitions "reflect the assumption that it involves a process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person [or group] over other people [or groups] to structure and facilitate the activities and relationships in a group or organization" (Yukl, 1998, p. 3). Where definitions differ, disagreement focuses on "who exerts influence, how influence is exerted, the purpose for the exercise of influence, and its outcomes" (Leithwood & Duke, 1999, p. 46), and whether leadership should be "viewed as a specialized role or as a shared influence process" (Yukl, 1998, p. 3).

In a similar vein, within the field of educational research, ambiguity and confusion surrounding the notion of leadership have prompted scholars to challenge the pervasive view that equates school leadership with the principalship (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002; Donaldson, 2001; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Lambert & Walker, 2002; Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2002). Drawing on their extensive review of the literature, Heck and Hallinger (1999) argue that the predominant role-bound view of leadership has caused researchers to (i) "ignore other sources of leadership within the school" (p. 141); (ii) to assume that "student achievement ought to be the dominant criterion for assessing leader effectiveness" (p. 158); and (iii) has undermined efforts to understand successful school reform and improvement. Currently, some scholars and researchers are calling for an examination of different perspectives of school leadership that are not role bound, and that view leadership as a shared process where principals and teachers together negotiate goals and collaborate on strategies for improving learning of adults as well as children within schools (Barth, 2001; Donaldson, 2001; Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthy, 1996; Lambert & Walker, 2002; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Based on their review of the literature and their in-depth investigation of leadership in schools that had successfully implemented reform initiatives, Crowther et al. (2002, p. 26) emphasize the need for further empirical study of the perspectives of both administrators and teachers involved in school-based leadership and school revitalization. Similarly, based on their examination of emergent perspectives of leadership for school improvement, Heck and Hallinger (1999) call for inquiries that address important "blank spots" in our understanding of the leadership phenomenon, including in-depth descriptions of how principals and other school members "create and sustain the in-school factors that foster successful schooling" (p. 141). In concluding, these scholars contend that studies adopting a constructivist perspective can contribute to this research agenda by investigating:

how leadership unfolds within school settings as a shared, constructed phenomenon. It forces us to accept that our educational organizations are constructed realities, as opposed to systems or structures that operate independently of the individuals in them. (p. 148)

The study reported on here was conceived and designed within this context.

Purpose of the Study

The case study reported on here was part of a larger completed investigation. The research question guiding both investigations was: How do principals and teachers in secondary schools that have been involved in school improvement construct the concept and practice of leadership? A secondary purpose was to examine the principals' and teachers' perceptions and understanding of the relationship between leadership and school improvement. Specifically, the objectives were (i) to collect, document, and analyze principals' and teachers' constructions of the concept and practice of leadership; (ii) to document and analyze principals' and teachers' perceptions of the supports for and barriers to participation in leadership; (iii) to identify, analyze, and report on the school norms, structures, and processes that characterize leadership; and (iv) to document and analyze principals' and teachers' perceptions and understanding of the relationship between leadership and school improvement.

Conceptual Framework

Our aim throughout this investigation was to examine how principals and teachers in select secondary schools conceived of leadership, and how they perceived and understood the relationship between leadership and school improvement. To accomplish this aim, this investigation was conducted within a constructivist framework, which assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and subject create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 27). A constructivist leadership research orientation "examines how leaders and others in the organization create shared understandings about their role and participation in school" (Heck & Hallinger, 1999, p. 146). The strengths of a constructivist orientation, these scholars contend, "is in illuminating that which is little known or hidden from view" (p. 147) and in revealing how, through examination of the unique nature of each school's culture and context, one can arrive at interpretations about how culture and context shape leadership (p. 146). The constructivist research orientation in leadership study is distinct from prevalent positivist and post-positivist orientations that examine how designated leaders carry out administrative tasks, problem solve, and make decisions, and assumes that individuals in schools concern themselves with making sense of their context. In brief, individual and shared constructions of leadership continuously shape the institutional culture in which administrative tasks occur.

Methods

In order to conduct this investigation, we adopted a collective case study approach that was instrumental in nature (Stake, 1995, 2000). In collective case study, Stake contends, "cases are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding … about a still larger collection of cases" (2002, p. 437). Underpinning this approach are constructivist notions informed by relativist ontological assumptions and subjectivist epistemological assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). An emergent design was followed in order to ground the research within the respondents' current contextual realities (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The larger investigation was conducted in three secondary schools from January to December 2002. The case study reported on here was conducted between January and May 2002.

Selection of Site

A secondary school within an older part of a large urban centre in Manitoba was selected for this study. Greenwood Collegiate, as it is called in this study, had a professional staff of 56 teachers and served a socioeconomically diverse and multicultural student population of approximately 1,000 students. Greenwood had been involved in a formal school improvement network since 1991, and was selected because of its long-time involvement in the school improvement network and because of its positive reputation among school and community members. As well, within the formal school improvement network, Greenwood was considered a "Star School." National and international educators and researchers regularly visited Greenwood in order to observe and learn about successful school improvement initiatives and change.

Selection of Participants

The principal, two assistant principals, and five teacher participants were included in this case study. Teacher participants were selected from an alphabetized list of teaching staff members in the manner described by Borg and Gall (1989) as "systematic sampling" (p. 224). Specifically, every ninth member of this teaching staff of 56 was selected and invited to participate; all those invited agreed to participate. Of the eight participants, only the principal, one of the assistant principals, and one of the teachers had been at Greenwood Collegiate since the initial involvement of the school in the school improvement network.

Data Sources

As the aim of this study was to understand leadership and its relationship to school improvement from the perspectives of the principals and teachers, data were collected primarily through individual interviews in the manner described by Stake (1995). Each participant was interviewed on two separate occasions, with each interview lasting approximately one hour. We also conducted focus group interviews in the manner described by Noonan (1997). The same teachers that participated in the focus groups also participated in the individual interviews. There were a total of four focus group interviews conducted, two with the three principals and two with the five teachers. The first two focus group interviews, one with the principals and one with the teacher group, were conducted before the individual interviews began. A second focus group interview with each group was undertaken directly following the completion of the individual interviews. The focus group interviews provided us with the opportunity to, first, explain the intent of the research and, second, generate first-stage analysis and interpretations. We observed that the conversations that took place in the first set of focus group interviews prompted participants to exchange views and experiences and come to a shared understanding of the intent of the study and their role. During the second set of focus group interviews, participants' feedback regarding our initial interpretations and analysis helped to focus and deepen our understanding of the degree to which participants' constructions of leadership and school improvement corresponded. Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed, and a typewritten copy was returned to the respondents for a member check before being analyzed as data (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, p. 313).

Other data sources included direct observation of classrooms and school activities. Over the months that we spent conducting this study, for example, we (i) visited each of the teacher participant's classrooms and observed each teach; (ii) attended a special school-wide student advocacy day during which we observed individual teachers interact with groups of students; (iii) attended a staff meeting and a school council meeting; and (iv) attended extracurricular activities, including a student-planned "spirit week," a drama production, and sports events. We each kept a field journal in which we recorded observations and interpretations over the time spent in the school; these were compared and discussed during the data collection and analysis stages of the investigation. Documents including the school handbook and newsletters published by the formal school improvement network were collected and examined during the data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two stages as described by Bogdan and Biklen (1992), with the first occurring during data collection in the field and the second once all interviews and observations had been completed. During data collection, we regularly discussed and compared observations and field notes and noted initial interpretations. The discussion after the first set of focus group and individual interviews, for example, helped us construct questions to probe respondents' perceptions and understanding of leadership and school improvement during the second set of interviews.

Once the data collection had been completed, we independently reviewed field journals, documents, and interview transcriptions in an iterative fashion. Worth noting, perhaps, is that prior to analyzing the interview transcriptions, we used the line-numbering option from Microsoft Word to number each line of all the transcriptions. This line numbering facilitated the accurate referencing of excerpts from the interviews. A system of colour coding was used to assist in managing the interview data. The transcriptions for each of the respondents' interviews were printed on paper of a different colour. The transcriptions of the first and second interviews for respondent one, for example, were printed on pink paper; for respondent two on blue paper; and so forth. In order to differentiate the first and second interviews of each respondent, we drew a line with a felt marker down the right-hand side of the pages of the second interview transcripts.

Once the transcriptions were prepared in this manner, each of us read them several times and coded and categorized them according to patterns and emergent themes. Once our independent analysis of the data was accomplished, we met on several occasions to discuss and confirm dominant themes and proceed with the interpretations.

Standards of Rigour

In order to enhance trustworthiness of the research, we adopted several strategies. To enhance credibility, we used multiple data sources and data collection strategies, incorporated a diversity of perspectives, and collected data over several months. As well, we consulted with other scholars familiar with school leadership to provide for investigator triangulation, namely the "search for additional interpretation more than the confirmation of a single meaning" (Stake,

1995, p. 115). Member checks were ongoing and were conducted over the course of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, p. 313). In adopting a constructivist research orientation, our aim was to provide readers not with a theory or generalized truth about school leadership, but rather with "raw material" to support the reader's own generalizing and judgements concerning transferability of the interpretations (Stake, 1995, p. 102).

Interpretations and Discussion

In this section, we begin with a summary of Greenwood Collegiate's 10-year involvement in school improvement. The summary was constructed from the accounts of the respondents and in this way is grounded in their understandings of, and experiences with, school improvement at Greenwood. From our analysis of the data we identified several themes, but for the purposes of this article we will include interpretations of and will discussonly three: (i) principals' and teachers' constructions of leadership and school improvement; (ii) perceptions of the role of the school improvement network in sustaining school improvement; and (iii) perceptions of barriers to the development of leadership and sustained school improvement.

Greenwood Collegiate's Involvement in School Improvement

In the late 1980s, there was a growing awareness among the staff at Greenwood Collegiate that there were a significant number of students "falling through the cracks." Even though the principals and teachers believed parents and students were satisfied with school programs that served the exceptional learners and students with special needs, there was the sense that the "students in the middle" were not learning and achieving at their ability levels. High levels of absenteeism and deteriorating standards of behaviour among the average achievers contributed to this perception. Dealing with this group of students who comprised the majority was causing divisiveness, low morale, and increased stress among the teaching staff. As well, parents were more vocal about their dissatisfaction with the school programs and the teaching at Greenwood. The initial tendency among the principals and teachers had been to avoid the issues, but growing pressures from students and parents eventually prompted a general admission that something had to change. By 1991, principals and teachers recognized that the curricular and extracurricular programming needed to be examined with a view to improving learning opportunities for the large group of average students at Greenwood.

School Improvement Network

At the time that the Greenwood staff was evaluating its school programs, a national charitable organization was approaching schools and school divisions throughout Canada with the offer of funding to help address the needs of at-risk adolescents. The current principal, who was in 1991 assistant principal, led in forming a committee of teachers that wrote and submitted a proposal to the nonprofit foundation. The proposal was successful, and the funding that was provided allowed the staff to develop a plan aimed at improving learning for all students, but in particular those students "in the middle" who were at-risk. The school improvement committee, as it became known, in the first instance made the decision to use some of the funding to hire a consultant to help staff develop a plan for school improvement. The consultant they engaged had a background in education and had extensive experience working with managers in education

and health who were intent on increasing organizational efficiency. The consultant encouraged the school improvement committee to involve staff in designing a survey to collect data that would help them to understand the various stakeholders' perceptions of and expectations for teaching and learning at Greenwood. This first data set, the consultant explained, would serve as a baseline and point of departure for planning for school improvement. She advised the committee and the staff that the process of data gathering, interpretation, and planning for improvement should be repeated and ongoing. The Greenwood staff's first experience with the collection and analysis of data was supported by extensive surveying of the parents, students, staff, and community members served by the school. Their investigation produced two major findings. First, school and community members believed that for students to be successful at Greenwood, they needed to experience positive relationships with teachers and one another. Second, the school needed to offer a broad-based curriculum that was relevant and addressed diverse student interests and abilities. There had to be "something for everyone." In brief, through the process most staff members had come to understand and accept that all students were entitled to the opportunity to experience personal and academic success.

"Relationships" and "relevant learning" were terms that we heard repeatedly over the months spent in the school. The principal, assistant principals, and some of the teacher respondents used these terms when they referred to the goals for school improvement. These goals, long-time respondents believed, had evolved out of the "lessons learned" from Greenwood's initial involvement with the national charitable organization, and its subsequent involvement with a formal school improvement network. Based on these two key findings, the staff in 1991 made the decision to strike two school improvement committees to design and help the staff implement student advocacy classes and graduation portfolios.

Student Advocacy Classes

When students arrived in Grade 10 they selected a teacher to act as their advocate. The selection process occurred in mid-October once the incoming Grade 10 students had had the opportunity to become familiar with the school and the teachers. The selected teacher became the student's advocate for the three years of high school. The student would go to this teacher whenever he or she needed advice or support. Formal meetings of the advocacy classes occurred when the whole group of students for whom the teacher was advocate would come together. The advocacy classes were held on an ad hoc basis and were called only when there were important issues to discuss or planning to be done. Advocacy classes did not exceed 20 students and lasted one hour.

Graduation Portfolios

During the advocacy classes the students consulted with their teacher advocate and their peers as they worked to complete their portfolio binders, a requirement for graduation at Greenwood Collegiate. To complete their portfolios, students had to demonstrate how, over their three years of high school, they had developed skills in working with others, problem-solving, and lifelong learning. Principals and teachers referred to these three skill sets as "outcomes" and had, over time, developed a set of rubrics used to measure student achievement in these three broad areas.

The three respondents who had been on staff since 1991 believed that the advocacy classes and portfolios had helped to define and sustain school improvement. Further, they believed that "the way things were done," in effect the school culture, had also changed over time. This group of long-time respondents believed that the success of Greenwood Collegiate was largely due to the value attributed to positive relationships among adults and students, and the value staff placed on collaboration and innovation in teaching methods and programs.

Principals' and Teachers' Constructions of Leadership and School Improvement

During the focus group and individual interviews, the three principals and the five teachers used the word "leadership" a great deal when speaking about the school in general, and the innovative programming in particular. Very clearly, all respondents believed leadership to be a critical factor in to the school's success. There were differences, however, in the ways in which these individuals viewed leadership, its purpose, and its importance. This finding prompted us to ask how the principals and teachers constructed their own, and understood each others', leadership roles in school improvement.

Principals' Leadership Role in School Improvement

There was a high degree of correspondence among the views of the principal and two assistant principals concerning their leadership role in the school. All three, for example, referred to leadership as a "shared responsibility," and differentiated between their role as administrators and their participation in school improvement initiatives. Even though the teachers shared similar views on the role of the three principals in administrative leadership, they expressed different perceptions of the leadership role played by the principals in school improvement. Following is a discussion of these perceptions and the questions that emerged from our analysis and interpretations.

Perceptions of the Principals' Administrative Role

When asked to describe their role as either principal or assistant principal, these three respondents claimed that they did not work alone, but rather as an "administrative team," in identifying and accomplishing tasks associated with the day-to-day management of the school. The three of them had provided administration at Greenwood Collegiate for six years. Each also expressed the belief that they worked together to address issues and solve problems as these arose. Through our observations and interactions with these three individuals over the duration of the study, it became clear that they shared a commitment to organizational efficiency that was supported by their open and ongoing communication. That they "spoke with one voice" became particularly evident during times of crises. There was an incident, for example, when unbeknownst to the staff at Greenwood, a former student had issued a written note expressing his anger and his intent to vandalize the school. Somehow this anonymous but threatening note had ended up being printed in the morning newspaper. With very little time to react before the opening of the school that morning, the three administrators developed a detailed crisis management plan to address what they considered the potential concerns of parents, staff, students, the school board, and community members. They then worked with the police to help identify and apprehend the author of the note before the end of that same school day.

All five teachers commented on the skill and effectiveness of the three administrators and their commitment to a team approach. One teacher who had recently come to Greenwood from another school praised the administrators for their efficiency and support of teachers:

I don't have to ask twice. I can talk to any one of the three of them and I know that if my request is reasonable, it will be looked after. This kind of support leaves me the energy I need to teach. In other schools, I have found the off-loading of administrivia onto teachers can drain energies and affect morale. The administration in this school is a well-oiled machine. I always know what I need to know about what's going on in the school but am not burdened or feel I have to attend to some [administrators'] agenda that has nothing to do with teaching.

In a similar vein, one long-time teacher respondent also praised the three principals for "taking care of business" and making his job "easy." That the three principals and five teachers viewed a skillful and effective administrative team as an important aspect of leadership in the school prompted us to inquire specifically about the principals' participation in school improvement initiatives going on at Greenwood.

Perceptions of the Principals' Participation in School Improvement

The principal and one of the assistant principals had been on staff at Greenwood Collegiate for more than 20 years, first as teachers, then subject department heads, and finally designated administrators. Both had been involved in developing the initial plan for school improvement in 1991. At that time, the principal was an assistant principal at Greenwood Collegiate and the current assistant principal was a teacher. The other assistant principal had joined the administrative team six years previously. When asked about the principals' participation in school improvement, the newest member of the administrative team praised his two principal colleagues for their initial and ongoing leadership in school improvement. He viewed them as the "catalysts" and "engines" for school improvement at Greenwood. When asked specifically about their roles, he outlined each colleague's expertise and knowledge base, interpersonal skills, and commitment to the initial "lessons learned" in 1991, namely the importance of relationships and relevant learning, advocacy classes, and graduation portfolios. When asked about his own participation in school improvement, he believed his role was to "support" what his principal and teacher colleagues were already doing, but he did not see himself as a leader in school improvement.

Perhaps surprisingly, the principal and long-time assistant principal did not see themselves as leaders of school improvement in the school either. Instead, they described leadership for school improvement as a "professional responsibility" that was shared by all staff members. In particular, they referred to the way in which teachers and principals collaborated in order to address the school's long-time school improvement goals of building and maintaining positive relationships and making learning relevant for all students. To illustrate their point, both referred to the school improvement committees that had designed and help implement the student advocacy classes and graduation portfolios, the two innovations that had been initiated in 1991 to address the school improvement goals of "relationships" and "relevant learning." They emphasized as well that the principals along with the teachers were assigned student advocacy classes and the responsibility of helping a group of students complete their portfolios before

graduation.

When asked to describe the principals' participation in school improvement, the one teacher respondent who had been at Greenwood in 1991 when the school improvement had been introduced praised the principal and long-time assistant principal for the roles they had played in initiating the advocacy classes and portfolios. His view, like that of the newest member of the administrative team, was that the focus and commitment to school improvement might be lost if either or both of these two ever left the school. The other four teacher respondents claimed to know some but not all of the history of school improvement at Greenwood. They also felt that they did not understand fully the role played in school improvement by the principal and long-time assistant principal. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that these four teachers held a different view of the principals' participation in school improvement. They believed that the three principals' chief contribution was made through their skillful administration and their support of, and respect for, teacher professionalism. A teacher who was in her second year at Greenwood stated:

I guess I would like to think that the administrators are responsible for making sure all the pieces are in place. They anchor the place. They are low key and keep it simple. I am wondering if that isn't the magic of this school? Nobody is looking down from above suggesting that we have to do these kinds of initiatives. We teachers can evolve our own growth and professional development. We decide the best way to improve teaching and learning for kids. We have a high degree of autonomy and the support of our principals. I think that's why we do so much. That's why many teachers become involved in initiatives and leadership.

Even though there was correspondence among the views of teachers and principals with respect to the importance of administrative leadership in supporting school improvement, there were multiple and sometimes conflicting views regarding how principals participated in and contributed to school improvement initiatives. This finding, coupled with the diverse ways in which the respondents used the terms "leadership," and "school improvement," prompted us to ask how these principals and teachers perceived the teachers' role in school improvement.

Teachers' Leadership Roles in School Improvement

The principal and two assistant principals consistently emphasized the importance of "teacher leadership" in achieving the long-time goals for school improvement. It was the "teachers," all three principals claimed, who were key in developing and maintaining respectful relationships and making learning relevant for students. Even though the five teacher respondents believed positive relationships and relevancy of learning to be important aspects of their work, they held multiple and sometimes conflicting views of what they understood by "teacher leadership" and "school improvement." Following is a discussion of these perceptions and the questions that emerged from our analysis and interpretations.

Principals' Perceptions of Teachers' Leadership Role in School Improvement

All three principals, for example, stated that teachers demonstrated leadership in the way in which they "collaborated" with one another and "worked in groups" to plan, initiate, and carry out the extensive and innovative programs for which Greenwood Collegiate was well known. By way of example, they referred to the two long-standing school improvement committees that had

been struck in 1991. These committees had become known as the "student advocacy program committee" and the "outcomes/portfolio committee." They were unique in that they were teacher organized and led, and included parents, community members, students, principals, and other staff members. The committees met on an ad hoc basis, and the role of lead teacher for each was rotated every two years. The principal respondents believed that the committees were important illustrations of how teacher leadership helped to foster and sustain school improvement at Greenwood.

When we asked if teachers assumed other leadership roles that fostered and sustained school improvement, the three principals gave numerous examples of curricular and extracurricular initiatives. They praised all of the teachers for their commitment and hard work. The long-time assistant principal helped us understand why the term "teacher leadership" was commonly heard in the school:

Teachers so seldom refer to themselves as "leaders" or to their work as "leadership." We decided a long time ago that if we were going to encourage some risk taking and innovation, we needed to develop teachers' confidence and encourage them to see themselves as professional colleagues. To accomplish this, the administrative team decided to have what we call our annual career talks. We meet with each teacher once a year and listen to them talk about their ideas about ways to improve their own teaching and/or ideas about making the school a better place for kids. It's amazing the kind of creativity and collaborative initiatives that have developed out of those meetings. I think teachers here see themselves as leaders. We talk about teacher leadership all the time in our staff meetings and when we meet with members of the community. In the last few years, several of the teachers from here have gone on to be administrators in other schools and school divisions. It's kind of a joke now. People talk about Greenwood Collegiate as a place that "grows leaders."

Similarly, the principal expressed the view that teacher innovation and commitment to professional development were key factors in the ongoing changes focused on improving learning opportunities for students:
This is a high-energy staff. They are very professional and care about all kids and their learning. It is the teachers' leadership both in the classroom and in the extracurricular programs that is the success story of this school. At Greenwood, there is something for everyone. Every student can be good at something and experience success. Teachers make a point of learning about new ideas and seeking out the support that they need to put these ideas into practice. That sometimes means going to a conference or workshop, or seeking out funding for release time in order to plan with other colleagues. Teachers here are learners.
These comments prompted us to ask about whether she believed that Greenwood had improved as a school. By way of proof, the principal stated that the longitudinal data showed that retention and high-school graduation rates had risen over 15% since 1991. She also referred to the longitudinal data concerning student attendance, and indicated that during the previous month "student attendance was at 95%. That is a dramatic improvement over where we were in any month in 1991."

The principal's and assistant principals' remarks underscored what they believed and what we had observed to be chief aspects of the culture of the school. In particular, there was an emphasis on adult as well as student learning. These comments and findings prompted us to ask the

teachers how they viewed their role in leadership, and in what ways they saw their actions as supporting school improvement.

Teachers' Perceptions of Their Leadership Role in School Improvement

Even though all five teachers used the term "teacher leadership," it became apparent during data analysis that there were two distinct views. The two teacher respondents who were relatively new members on staff, for example, shared the similar perception that teacher leadership referred to the work of the subject department heads. One of them commented:

The sense that I get from my department head when he … comes back from his meetings as a department head is that there is a sincere effort to keep all parties informed of what others in the school are doing. I guess I feel that any initiatives that we have undertaken as a department are valued and add to other things in the school. There is no overarching plan or structure being imposed from the top down. His leadership makes my job easier.

These two respondents did not clarify the relationship between leadership and school improvement, and had a vague understanding of the history of school improvement at Greenwood and the work of the two improvement committees. Neither knew that the student advocacy classes and graduation portfolios had been developed to promote positive relationships with students and make learning more relevant. These findings prompted us to ask how they viewed their role in school improvement. One claimed not to understand or be involved in school improvement; the other referred to one of the current school-wide goals of developing teaching methods to individualize instruction.

The other three respondents believed that "teacher leadership" referred to individual and collective professional development and innovation. One of these teachers commented, "There is of course the administrative leadership, but I think every teacher is a leader in his or her own classroom. We decide what we need to do to make learning interesting." Another teacher seemed to think that although the leadership roles of administrators and teachers were different, they were intertwined. Both administrative and teacher leadership were needed to support the success of the school. She said:

When I listen to what the principal often says in a staff meeting, her leadership is very much keeping it organized and simple, and turning decision making around teaching back to the teachers. She treats us like professionals and never tells us what to do. Rather, she puts it back to us and includes us. I don't know if people realize this, but we are always very much included in the leadership model. I think the principal sees her role as providing support for teachers as we explore ways to develop our teaching and keep learning meaningful for all of our students.

These three teachers used the words "energized" and "synergy" to describe the culture of the school, and claimed that the numerous teacher-led initiatives within the school promoted these characteristics of the school. When asked to specify the role of teacher leadership in supporting school improvement, only the long-time teacher respondent referred to "relationships" and "relevant learning." The other two respondents referred to the popularity of the school programs and high-profile events, including drama and music productions, and the success of the school's competitive sports teams. The multiple views among teacher respondents about what constituted

school improvement prompted us to inquire about the role of the school improvement network in sustaining school improvement.

Perceptions of the Role of the School Improvement Network in Sustaining School Improvement

When speaking of the role of the school improvement network, the principal and long-time assistant principal used the past tense. They talked of the time when the network had provided funding, professional development, and consultants to assist in the school's goal setting and planning of ways to improve learning opportunities for at-risk students. When asked specifically about the current role of the school improvement network, the principal indicated that Greenwood, although a "Star School" in the network, no longer received funding. As members of a "Star School," those at Greenwood were invited to make presentations to other schools and to take part in the network's professional development activities. As well, the network directed to the school a variety of visitors who were interested in finding out about successful school improvement.

None of the teacher respondents mentioned the school improvement network. When asked about the network, only three of the respondents knew that Greenwood was a "Star School" in the network. Only one teacher respondent had participated in professional development activities sponsored by the network.

The principal and two other long-time respondents believed the school's initial involvement in the school improvement network had provided necessary resources and expertise to initiate change. Clearly, these respondents believed that without the extra resources and expertise, sustaining innovation had become more difficult. Embedded in their responses were questions about the kind of leadership and expertise that would be required to continue to improve learning opportunities for students, particularly those at risk. These observations and findings prompted us to ask respondents about what they viewed as potential barriers to leadership development and the challenges of sustaining school improvement at Greenwood.

Barriers to Leadership Development and Sustained School Improvement

In one sense, there was a high degree of correspondence among the views of the respondents. All three principals and five teachers, for example, cited a shortage of time as the chief barrier to the development of leadership capable of sustaining school improvement. Embedded in their responses, however, were their multiple views of "leadership" and "school improvement."

The principal and long-time assistant principal, for instance, believed that there was not enough time for teachers to "talk and work together." In particular, the principal claimed that more time was needed for teachers to "learn from one another" and "improve their practice." Both made a point of saying that they no longer received funding from the school improvement network. This money, both claimed, had allowed the school to "buy release time" for teachers to participate in professional development and to collaborate on innovative teaching initiatives. Both of these long-time school members also expressed the concern that the "newer staff members" did not in all cases understand the importance of the student advocacy classes and graduation portfolios.

They believed that school improvement, as they had defined it in 1991, was going to be progressively more difficult to sustain as staff retired and new teachers were hired. These comments prompted us to ask whether the school had conducted any follow-up surveys since 1991. The principal stated that even though the consultant had initially suggested that the process of data gathering and analysis should be ongoing, there was neither funding nor time to support the activity. It was the view of the principal that a shortage of time and funding could potentially undermine leadership development and school improvement.

The teacher respondents also believed that the shortage of time and money threatened future leadership development and school improvement, but for different reasons. Two of the respondents who were newer staff members, for example, claimed that the teachers at Greenwood "worked harder" than teachers in most other schools. One expressed a fear of not being able to "measure up" to what she felt were very high expectations placed upon teachers at Greenwood Collegiate. The three other teacher respondents also believed that with more time and funding they could be more effective leaders in curriculum development and extracurricular activities. One teacher was critical of the professional development activities that occurred in the school division of which Greenwood was a part. These activities included mandatory division-wide professional development days that were planned by central office personnel with little consultation with teachers. This teacher believed that the time and money spent on these events would be better spent on teacher-release time. In his words:

These compulsory activities do very little for teachers or students. Given the time to do with as we wanted, we could do a better job of supporting one another's professional development and learning. Kids would win in the end.

These comments and findings encouraged us to inquire whether there might be a moment in the future when Greenwood principals and teachers would no longer have the time and energy to become involved in leadership and school improvement, and whether lack of resources would undermine the school's culture of "innovation," "energy," and "synergy." A teacher in her third year at Greenwood answered yes. All of the other respondents, however, said no. Even though embedded in the responses were multiple views of leadership and school improvement, there was a general consensus that commitment to innovative programming for students was an important and sustainable aspect of the school culture at Greenwood Collegiate.

Conclusions and Implications

In order to provide a context in which to draw conclusions and suggest implications for research, policy, and practice, it is necessary to examine key interpretations and findings. Important in the first instance was that all respondents believed leadership to be a critical factor related to the school's success. Even though there were differences in the ways in which these individuals viewed leadership and its purposes, all perceived that (i) the skillful performance of administrative tasks and functions was an important aspect of school leadership; (ii) "teacher leadership" was distinct from administrative leadership, and encompassed professional development and the numerous innovations in curricular and extracurricular programming; and (iii) there were many different leaders and numerous leadership activities going on simultaneously in the school. These findings prompt us to suggest that leadership that fosters successful schooling is a shared professional responsibility that involves skill and coordination of

administrative goals, and teaching and learning goals. In a similar vein, findings from their large-scale investigation of schools that had successfully implemented school improvement initiatives led Crowther et al. (2002) to conclude that teacher leadership was a critical factor. These scholars define teacher leadership as "action that transforms teaching and learning in schools" (p. xvii). Further, they argue that teacher leadership, along with administrative leadership, is important for school success. Based on their empirical findings, they propose a new model of leadership for schools that they call "parallel leadership," which they define as "a process whereby teacher leaders and their principals engage in collective action" that "activates and sustains the knowledge-generating capacity of schools" (p. 38). Like these researchers, we argue that findings from the continued investigation of emergent perspectives of school leadership are critical to the development and improvement of teacher and principal pre-service and in-service preparation programs (p. 16). Further, we contend that a further study of teacher leadership, and the ways in which it "parallels" other sources of leadership, will contribute to our knowledge of school leadership as a "shared influence process" (Yukl, 1998, p. 4). Such knowledge has the potential of informing policy as well as leadership practice in schools.

Where respondents' views differed the most was in how they perceived "school improvement" and how they understood the relationship between leadership and school improvement. This finding led us to conclude, as have others (Seashore-Louis, Toole, & Hargreaves, 1999, p. 251), that the term "school improvement" is ambiguous and problematic. That the concern for the melioration of schooling has been a consistent focus in educational research and practice helps us to understand the current pre-occupation with the term (Willower & Forsyth, 1999, p. 2), but does not account for the multiple and often conflicting views of what is actually meant by "school improvement." The constructions of the long-time respondents involved in the Greenwood Collegiate case study lead us to suggest that involvement in formal school improvement networks can promote deliberate change through the provision of additional resources and expertise to which the school would not normally have access. Deliberate change over the short term, however, is no guarantee that improvement will continue when the extra resources are no longer available. Seashore-Louis et al.'s critical review of the school improvement research prompted them to conclude that (i) the assumption that external support from agencies and networks is needed to support effective change is problematic; and (ii) there is a need for the "rethinking of school improvement" (p. 270). Like these authors, we contend that more research is required that addresses new questions, including the question, "what is the source and role of leadership in initiating and sustaining transformational change?" (p. 269)

Finally, all respondents believed the chief barrier to leadership development to support school improvement was the shortage of time (i.e., to work collaboratively and to participate in professional development and learning). This finding causes us to suggest that to create and sustain in-school factors that foster successful schooling over time, adult learning and the development of professional expertise are key. Smylie, Conley, and Marks' (2002) extensive review of the research on school improvement prompted them to argue that "school improvement and the improvement of teaching and student learning depend fundamentally on the development of teachers' knowledge, abilities and commitments" (p. 167). In a similar vein, we contend that future research needs to investigate more closely conceptions of school leadership and school improvement that link leading to learning (Barth, 2001; Crowther et al.,

2002; Donaldson, 2001; Elmore et al., 1996; Lambert & Walker, 2002; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000).

Our aim in this article was to draw on key findings from our case study of Greenwood Collegiate, in order to build a context for our discussion of implications for research and practice. In concluding, we stress the need for researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to further consider ways in which emergent perspectives of school leadership might address the "blank spots" in our understanding of the resources and expertise required to sustain school development and success.

Acknowledgement

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