

# **A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP**

## **Introduction**

The notion of sustainability is, of course, most commonly associated with the environment and focuses on the need to sustain diversity, conserve our resources and to ensure that what we do today in meeting our perceived needs does not have a deleterious impact on future generations.

How useful is this metaphor of sustainability for the field of education? In their recent book Hargreaves and Fink (2006) argue that it is apposite as the pace and direction of reform and change over the last decade has been such that it is has damaged educational systems and the students in them in serious ways. One example they cite is the standardization of curriculum, the very opposite of diversity. The impact of recent reforms on educational leadership has also been substantial – so much so that there is evidence accumulating that many potential leaders are opting not to take up such roles and that many existing leaders are retiring early. Again this is the antithesis of conservation of our resources

## **The Policy context**

Over the last decade reforms in the school systems in most of the developed countries have stressed accountability ( against explicit standards or outcomes) marketization ( a belief that students and their parents should be treated as customers and that they should have choice) competition ( a view that schools will benefit from rivalry) and self management. The implication of these reforms for schools and their educational leaders has been that they are judged by a relatively narrow range of easy-to-measure criteria- chief amongst them are student results against prescribed standards , but also enrolments, financial viability, school image.

There have been many critics of these particular reforms. Hargreaves and Fink, for example, suggest that they have led, amongst other things, to a narrower curriculum, restricted innovation, narrowed the range of teaching and learning strategies, undermined teacher professionalism and precipitated greater levels of stress. Similar criticism has been made of comparable developments in Australia ( eg Lingard R( 2002) .

Over the last few years these particular reforms have begun to be modified. For example in some countries there is now less standardized testing , more support for struggling schools, more training for school leaders. However these modifications do not signal the end of the era of reform. A new wave of reforms has begun to take place in the UK in particular which should be of interest to Australians. These are based on the same small government principles and in particular the view that governments should regulate and finance services rather than provide them itself. The main focus of these latest reforms has been efficiency and cost savings but there is also a focus on quality improvement. That is, there is a belief that the private sector can not only run services more effectively but also produce more quality outcomes. To date there are few examples of privatisation of education systems, though some exist in the US and UK.

Many Australian teachers ( and indeed, on the basis of past experience, the Australian public generally) will view this latest development with suspicion or outright opposition. Of course education is an inherently ideological activity. While there are difference in the values, hopes and aspirations of individuals and different political beliefs the directions these educational changes should take (in financing, structures, curriculum, teaching and learning methods and so on) will be a matter for debate.

The view that educational change is necessary, however, is not controversial. There is little disagreement that the world in which schools (and indeed all educational institutions) operate has been changing very quickly. As a result the understanding and competencies needed to flourish in the contemporary world have changed and will continue to change for the foreseeable future. This has been recognised by the OECD in the PISA project which monitors the competencies (which include both skills and knowledge) of children at the end of compulsory education which are essential for full participation in society. The focus in this project has been on broad competencies in reading, science, mathematics and problem solving rather than on specific curriculum outcomes. So for example in literacy, PISA examines the capacity of students to analyse, reason and communicate as they solve problems in a number of subject areas. But there has been a recognition by the OECD that success in life depends on a much wider range of competencies. The recently concluded De Se Co project also funded by the OECD has tried to define what some of these wider competencies might be and to provide a framework for future PISA assessment.

The assumptions behind both of these projects is that schools ( and educational systems) need to be regularly examining their practices and curriculum to ensure they are achieving this basic outcome- of ensuring that students have acquired the knowledge and skills (appropriate for their stage of development) which will enable full participation in society.

In Australia similar thinking has been guiding reforms in some of our education systems . The Qld education reforms (the ‘new basics’) of the last five or so years are a good example as are curriculum reforms in all States which introduced vocational education into schools and combine school with university study.

## **Two approaches to educational reform**

Assuming the case for continuous improvement has been made out the question is how best to effect it. It seems to me that at the government level there are two basic approaches.

The first is what many governments over a range of countries have tried to do over the last decade and that is to dictate what needs to be done through a prescriptive standardized curriculum and to implement strong accountability mechanisms which directly evaluate if students achieve the aims of these curricula.

The second is to try to define broad outcomes ( as opposed to curriculum) of the type that are evident in the PISA and De Se Co projects and then allow schools to devise their own ways of meeting them, within a quality assurance framework. This is broadly the approach taken in Finland – the country which is the top performer in the PISA assessments.

I would argue that the first of these methods is demonstrably, not sustainable and that the second at least provides the potential for the kind of sustained and sustainable change and sustainable leadership that will be needed in the foreseeable future.

I won't in this paper examine the evidence for the weakness of the first approach. I will just assert as Hargreaves and Fink do (above) that there is a good deal of evidence that it has not succeeded in its own terms in systems that have tried it.

I think it was reasonable for governments to have experimented with the standardization/accountability/marketization approach. It has led in my view to some changes in education that have been desirable. In particular many schools have become less inward looking- many schools in Australia now have partnerships with Universities for example, or have set up networks with other local schools. However the reason for the ultimate failure of this approach is that it ignored the fact that for change to be *sustained* it needs the people who are involved day in and day out in making decision about what they will do to be committed both emotionally and intellectually to the directions of the changes.

What I want to do in the rest of this paper is to examine a number of cases of successful reform from both the university and school sector and combine the finding from them into a tentative framework for sustainable leadership and reform.

### **Alternative reform directions.**

In recent years there have been some other approaches to educational reform. In the late 90s in the UK, for example, the Government funded the IQEA initiative. The aim of this initiative was to improve student outcomes across the ability range. It was based on a number of principles such as: involvement of all staff, the use of research data to guide experimentation, a commitment to staff development and collective learning, a commitment to inquiry and reflection.

Rather than summarize the results of this whole initiative which was carried out in 40 or so schools, I will give a case study which I hope give a bit more of its flavour.

The Principal of Sharnbrook school in Bedfordshire started with the assumption that the authority structures of schools were set up to ensure efficiency of everyday operations rather than development and innovation. To counter this he decided to set up an alternative innovation structure. This "cadre" was a group of people from across subject departments. The dozen staff in the cadre were divided into trios

Each trio was supported by the Principal who allowed them to visit classrooms of others within the school and to visit other schools. They were given time release. The task of each trio was to experiment with some new teaching techniques/assessment strategies. Each member of staff was asked to suggest areas for improvement and these 6 areas were chosen to be investigated. Importantly these were small scale designed to have quick payoffs and to develop a process as much as the actual product.

They were asked to use relevant research and to work in conjunction with a university partner. Each trio was assigned to coach 15 staff members in the successful techniques they had trialled. The indicator of success was the extent to which the 15 staff members tried the new technique themselves

The trial was evaluated after one year and various changes made. For example students were added to the trios.

After four years it was reported that the school had been transformed.

- there was greater involvement of all staff (and students) in decision making
  - teachers skills were valued and used in new ways which raised morale
  - the concept of experimentation was built into the ways of operating (including opening up of classrooms)
  - new structures had been developed.
  - a new group of leaders has been identified
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- The values of staff changed and now underpinned the new culture of continuous enquiry

In summary the case study suggests some principles for sustainable change in a school.:

- a need to build commitment to innovation and experimentation
- the need to engage in incremental reforms which are not beyond the capacity of the majority of staff to implement
- a commitment to building staff capacity
- commitment to distributed leadership

### **Three Principles of Sustainability**

In his work on transforming universities *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities* Burton Clark used a case study approach to try to ascertain what successful universities had done to adapt themselves to the dramatic changes to their environments- essentially an environment in which governments were not longer prepared to support them financially to the extent they once did.

He argues the steady state of universities in their traditional form was one of inertia. Universities were strictly discipline focussed, rule bound, risk averse and isolated from the communities in which they operated.

Today, successful universities are connected with the community and industry, increasingly self funded and reward interdisciplinary activity in both research and curriculum. Warwick is an example well known to Australian academics, others he refers to in his book are the University of Strathclyde in Scotland, Twente in Holland, Jonsuu in Finland and Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden

They have all achieved this transformation by changing the nature of their bureaucracy from one which had a vested interest in steady state to one which has a vested interest in change.

However turning transformation into sustainable change is a more complex matter again. Based on his case studies examined over almost a decade he has come up with three principles of sustainability:

1. that elements of transformation become elements of sustainability as their cumulative incrementalism produces a perpetual momentum. The university leans toward the future.

2. that elements of transformation become

elements of sustainability as they become interlocked and re-enforcing in a new basic organisational character

3.. that behind the interlocking interaction and the perpetual momentum, something like institutional *will* plays a basic role. This rests on the notion of volition – a decision to pursue a particular path, which becomes a collective will- people create, rather than find, their wants, needs, and interests. The decision decides what the want is to be and what is needed: it creates the interest.

To restate: the newly-fashioned self-reliant university ... is built and sustained out of blocks of will reflecting assertive ambition. In the beginning of change there is volition, along the way there are emergent acts of will, and in the end there remains the ambition to fashion an even better university. If there is a single secret in significant ongoing university change, perhaps this is it. You start with volition, the willful decision to pursue a certain path of transforming action – and take it from there

I would argue that most high schools have been quite similar to the traditional university: both have strong authority structures and top down leadership, a strong discipline focus, little connection with external stakeholders. Hence much of what is suggested by Clark seems to me to be as relevant to schools facing a changing society as to universities.

What ( tentative) conclusions about sustainable change can we draw from these case studies in two educational contexts.

1. At the macro level governments should adopt a reform approach that enables individual institutions to adopt their own solutions to the issues that face them.
- 2 At the institutional level
  - leaders need to develop values in staff which will help create a culture of inquiry which will challenge orthodoxies
  - • leaders need to develop democratic ways of operating so that staff create their own goals (within agreed frameworks) and help each other to achieve them.
  - •Need to create structures that have a vested interest in change rather than inertia
  - •Need to distribute leadership across the institution and enable this distributed leadership to build the capacity for change
  - •Need to ensure that the various elements for change interact and reinforce each other

At least one other principle will need to be considered, both for universities and schools , the principle of engaging in succession management. The very essence of sustainable change is improvement over time. To achieve this, institutions need to conceive of leadership as something that lasts beyond the tenure of any one person. This could mean ensuring selection criteria for new leaders incorporate a commitment to the values and changes the incumbent leader and staff have put in place. Alternatively, or in addition, the broadening/distribution of leadership will ensure there are people within the institution who can sustain a change agenda over time.

How well this framework for sustainability of reform and leadership will work only time will tell. However on the basis of what we know to date it is a better bet than alternative paths that have been tried over the last decade.

Lingard, R. et al ( 2002) *Journal of Educational Administration* 40, 1

Clark, R. Burton, (1998) *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities: Organisational Pathways of Transformation*. Oxford, Pergammon Press.

Hargreaves, A. and Fink, D (2006) *Sustainable Learning*, San Francisco, Jossey Bass

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