

HOW SUCCESSES OF COLLABORATIVE SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS OFFER HOPE FOR FRAMING COLLEGIAL SCHOOL LEADERSHIPS OF THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Current conceptualisation of school principalship characterises the principal as the person in the 'hot seat' and 'lonely at the top' (Crowther et al. 2000). The present research found that the establishment of school partnerships in NSW led to attractive principalship and offered hope for improved and more attractive school leadership.

KEY WORDS

Celebrating successes – collaborative school partnerships – framing better principalship – educational success

INTRODUCTION

Following adverse comments on HSC results for some schools in Western Sydney in January 1996, the incumbent Minister of Education embarked upon an ambitious programme to restructure some of the secondary schools in the DET so as to establish special collaborative school partnerships called multicampus colleges. The ministerial reforms were embodied in what the Minister codenamed 'The Collegiate Education Plan' (DET, 1999). The essence of the Plan was to amalgamate selected years 7 – 12 schools into collaborative partnerships consisting of years 7 – 10 middle schools and a dedicated years 11 – 12 senior campus.

This Plan was first experimented upon at Nirimba in Western Sydney where three years 7 – 12 comprehensive high schools (Quakers Hill High School, Riverstone and Seven Hills High) were restructured to become years 7 – 10 middle schools of one college and integrated with a new years 11 – 12 senior campus called Wyndham College. The four sites were then integrated in a collaborative partnership called the Nirimba Education Collegiate.

Following the successful launch of the Nirimba Collegiate in January 1998, DET moved quickly to introduce similar partnerships in other school districts. Apart from changes in the structural features, the most innovative change was cultural. It was the break down of individual school autonomy which the participating schools had previously enjoyed and its replacement by coalitions of collaborative principals. This occurred because, following the integration, the principals of the schools within a Collegiate were to work collaboratively as a collegial team. This way, a new kind of principalship or leadership, founded on teamwork and celebration of peer

support, rather than individual autonomy and loneliness at the top, was born.

By 2004, nearly 8% of secondary school students enrolled fulltime in all NSW government secondary schools, were in Collegiate partnerships (ABS, 2004, p.13). Schools integrated in the Collegiate partnerships represented 10% of all DET secondary schools in NSW (DET, 2004). The Collegiate partnerships were now significant players in a new partnership engaged in the delivery of secondary schooling across collaborative partnerships in new structures.

However, available literature shows that generally, there is a gap in the information on leadership and coordination across the individual boundaries of these collaborative school partnerships. This paper aims to help bridge this gap by using the latest qualitative data software *Leximancer* (Smith, 2007) to analyse data collected from 7 of these schools to investigate the leadership practices and the new strategies introduced for educational success in these schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper is situated at the intersection of literature on educational leadership and educational change dynamics. There is a well established understanding that leadership is the basis for educational success in any school (Robinson, 2008). It is also well agreed that any structural change is only worthwhile if its aim is to improve organisational performance. Fullan (2000, p.4 and 2003, p.11) calls this "the moral purpose of educational change". Silins and Mulford (2002, p.431) concur when they add that "improved student learning" ought to be the primary motive for educational reform. Dinham (1995, p.70) was of the same opinion when he suggested that "facilitating pupil achievement (was) the acid test of successful school reform".

Bolman and Deal (2003) suggest that restructuring initiatives change not only the

organisational structure of the participating schools but also the practices which constitute the synergies in the human interactions and students' outcomes in the schools that become involved in the new strategies introduced for educational success. Similarly, Senge (1999, p. 43) highlights the inextricable interconnectedness between structural change and human behaviour when he says that "the underlying structures shape individual actions and create the conditions where types of events become likely." The catalyst that creates the synergy for such events to become real is leadership (Mintzberg, 1979). Mintzberg (1979) also strongly endorses coordinating leadership as the basis for successful coherence across organisational partnerships. This coordination and the culture that evolves from it, according to Bolman and Deal (2003), Evans (1996) and Schein (2005) is a direct function of leadership. This is why Schein (2005, p.15) goes as far as saying that "leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin". In similar congruence, Mulford, Silins and Leithwood (2004) attribute improved student learning to effective leadership. More recent research conducted at the University of Auckland by Professor Viviane Robinson (2008, p.1) using an approach called iterative Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) drew on national and international data to conclude that "clearly, leadership does matter".

In conclusion, there is ample literature to deduce that changing the structures of schools to create partnerships is important but it is not the only consideration. Enabling leadership is needed to understand those structures and to coordinate them if coherence and positive synergies are to be realised across the collaborative school partnerships. In this study, the structural changes and the leadership practices created by the Collegiate partnerships were investigated within the theoretical framework of Kivunja's (2006) New Dynamics Paradigm and analysed using relatively new qualitative software called Leximancer (Smith, 2007). These are outlined below.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The data was analysed within Kivunja's Dynamics Paradigm, designed and first presented in a PhD thesis (Kivunja, 2006). Because the steps followed in deriving the Dynamics Paradigm and all its variables are well documented in several publications (Kivunja, 2005; 2006; Kivunja and Power, 2006, Kivunja, 2007, p.35), and for brevity of the paper, there is no need to repeat details here. Readers are referred to these citations.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this investigation was gathered as part of a PhD case study. Details of the study design, methodology and major findings can be found in Kivunja (2006). Case study methods were followed to study 7 out of the 34 Collegiate partners. This decision was based on three criteria, namely: longevity, typicality and rural or urban location (For details see Kivunja, 2006, p.162). In each partnership, participation was voluntary. Interviewees were randomly selected from the list of individuals who had volunteered to be involved in the study. Interviewees included teachers, students and parents. The principal and deputy principal of each school was also interviewed. Permission was gained to have the interviews tape-recorded and this helped to speed up the process.

When the interview transcripts were converted into digital format and read into Leximancer software, Leximancer coded nodes in the data and processed it into primary themes that were occurring in the data from within and across the collaborative school partnerships. The themes were presented in graphic displays. The graphics showed the interconnectedness among the themes as well as their significance rankings. The themes were carefully examined and investigated for co-occurrence. By digitally increasing themes size from 20% to 40%, each theme was widened so that only the most predominant themes were displayed. The themes were profiled and investigated using inductive and verification techniques (Schwandt, 1997, p.80). The results are reported below with the assistance of Figure 1.

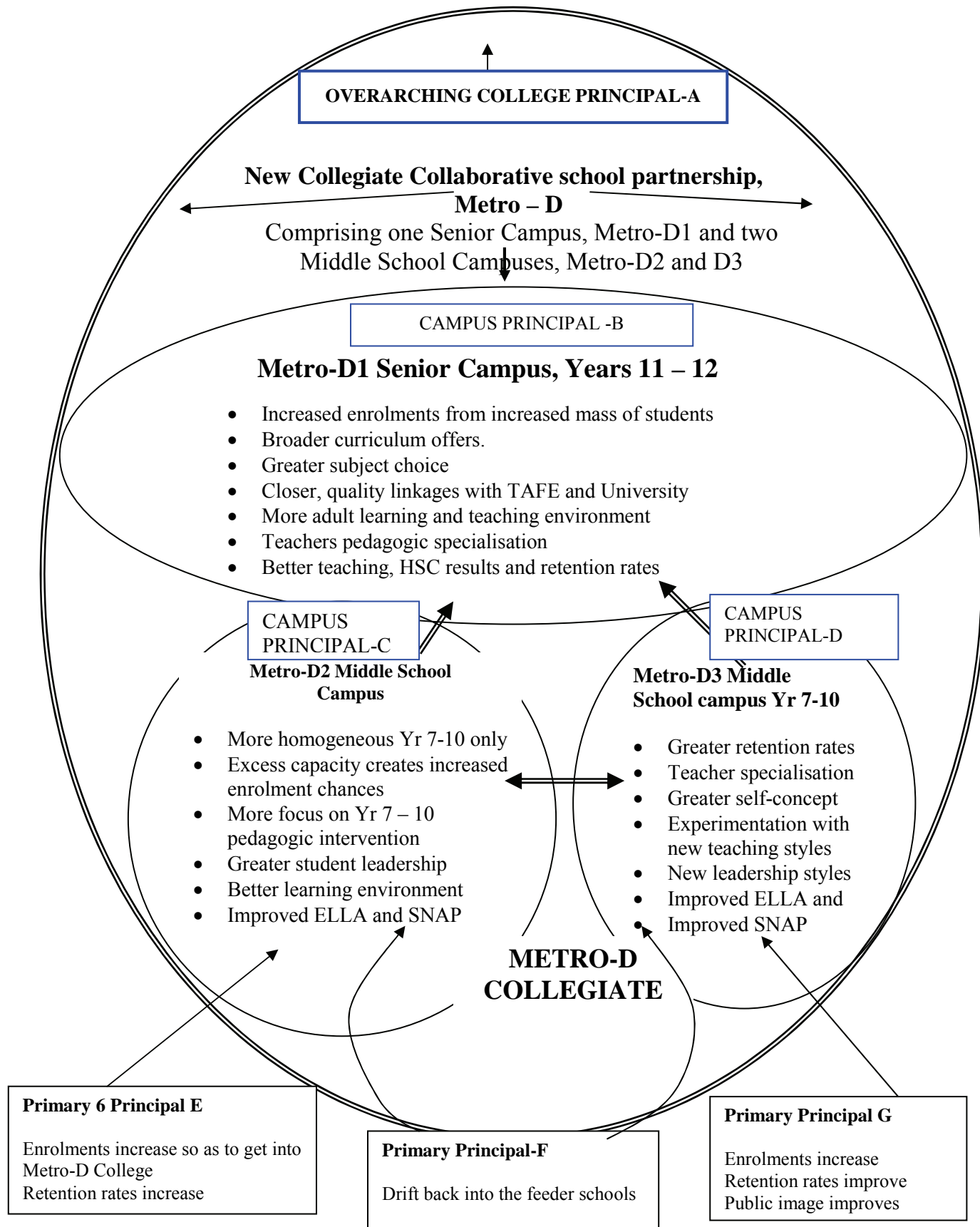


Figure 1: Collaborative leadership among NSW school partnerships

RESULTS

Figure 1 represents the collaborative partnerships found in the Collegiate studied, the leadership styles and organisational outcomes. The Collegiate is pseudonymed Metro D. It is lead by an overarching College Principal-A. The Collegiate comprises three campuses pseudonymed Metro-D1, D2 and D3 respectively. Metro-D1 is the senior campus and D2 and D3 are the middle school campuses. Each of the campuses is lead by a Campus Principal (B, C, D respectively). Herein lies the first ingredient of Collegiate synergy which makes leadership in a Collegiate intriguing, creative and attractive. The three Campus Principals work cooperatively with each other and collaboratively with the College Principal. This dynamic overcomes the “loneliness at the top syndrome” suffered by non-Collegiate school principals. Moreover, the leadership role of the overarching College Principal is to coordinate and to facilitate the work of the Campus Principals so that the Collegiate as a whole achieves its organisational objectives of improving student outcomes. Campus Principals said – and the College Principal agreed – that the College Principal had no line management authority over them. “We are a team of equals”, they said. Their leadership had become more interesting because, as one of them put it:

Now we have peers with whom we share decision-making and problem solving. We meet regularly and together we plan what is good for the Collegiate. We each have responsibility for our own campuses, but we don't act autonomously. We are constantly mindful of how what we do impacts on our Collegiate partners.

From such submissions I concluded that the leadership style in a Collegiate collaborative partnership is one based on the principle of “Unity without Uniformity”. Young and Hester (2004) explain that:

Unity without Uniformity is about being of one mind, united in what we do and aspiring to make a significant difference (but recognising our) increasing diversity. ... it requires self-evaluation as well as seeking common goals within the organisation. We need to work from the bottom up – self-definition first, then the organisation (p. 2004, p.1).

Inside each campus circle in Figure 1 are summarised examples of the coordination and synergies which go on within the Collegiate

collaborative partnership and some of the outcomes which are celebrated. Also shown are the primary feeder schools whose principals E, F and G respectively, send their year 6 graduates to the Collegiate.

CONCLUSION

The synthesis of the results showed that leadership and coordination of the critical mass of the Physical and Human Infrastructure brought together in a Collegiate collaborative school partnership, such as Metro-D, creates coherence and synergies which have potential for school improvement and effectiveness and to make school leadership more distributive and cooperative. The analysis found that the synergies in the new collaborative school partnership had resulted in significant impacts on students' enrolments, retention rates and curriculum on offer – all of which had increased significantly. Time series data on enrolments showed that on average, enrolments had increased by 22.5% between 1998 and 2004. Apparent retention rates (as defined in DET, 2004) were 44.12% higher than the state average. The increases had occurred in both the senior campuses and the middle school sites of the partnerships and were good cause for celebration.

The reasons these improvements were emerging were, firstly, because of the synergy of the critical mass of the larger numbers which resulted from the mergers of the schools. For example, as illustrated in Figure 1, Metro-D2 and D3 both send their year 10 graduates to Metro-D1. This boosts the enrolments in the senior campus – Metro-D1. Secondly, the schools had become more attractive to parents and students in the areas on the realisation that the schools could now offer a wider curriculum and a broader subject choice for the HSC. This is represented in Figure 1 by the arrows linking the primary schools E, F and G to the middle school campuses Metro-D1 and D2. This has also positive implications for collaboration between primary school principals and those within the Collegiate partnership.

Thirdly, the learning environment had also improved in several ways. For instance, there was consensus among all interviewees that the senior cohorts now learnt in a more mature environment which was also more academic because it focused more on the HSC. In the middle school campuses, there was agreement among all interviewees that “younger students had ‘matured’ by taking on the leadership roles that were normally carried out by year 12”.

As summarised in Figure 1, a large majority of the teachers interviewed said their pedagogic intervention had improved. They explained that quality teaching had improved because “many teachers had developed skills as ‘specialist senior teachers’ or middle school ‘specialists’ who honed their teaching skills in the delivery of the relevant pedagogy rather than teach as generalists across the years 7 – 12 continuum”. Teachers explained that leadership had allowed such specialisation to occur and they valued it. The improved students’ outcomes shown in the campuses were reported by all principals to be one of their greatest sources of satisfaction and interest in their new way of leadership. Principals were unanimous in their assertion that collaboration within their partnerships had created opportunity for them to celebrate success for their students. Their shared vision was to work together for the improvement of students’ outcomes rather than have one school compete against the other. This type of collaboration and satisfaction is needed if the principal’s job is to escape the stigma of ‘loneliness at the top’ and working alone ‘in the hot seat’.

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