Responding to a Growing Leadership Crisis

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While there is a gradual global movement to more considered principal preparation programs, uncertainty in how best to identify these aspirant leaders remains. In this paper the author seeks to answer this question: What are the talent management processes that education systems use to attract teachers to the role of school principal, build their capacity to fulfil the role, and ultimately deploy them to where they are needed? This article therefore reflects upon some of the responses undertaken by education systems both in Australia and abroad. The intent is to contribute furtherto this pertinent discussion in Queensland, especially as our system begins the process of implementing the priorities of the *Leadership Strategy 2020-2022.*

'I WOULD NEVER do your job!' is a statement regularly made by school staff and parents, to those in the role of school principal. Often, of course, followed by a complaint or difficult request. The message is clear: The role of a school principal is complex and challenging and more and more people don't want to do the job. This isn't just a localised challenge; it's a growing global crisis in which, increasingly, the number of principal vacancies is exceeding the number of suitably qualified applicants.

I have written about this issue and the benefits of effective principal preparation prior to appointment, in the June 2019 edition of *The Queensland Principal* and as a contributor to the QASSP publication *School Leader as Researcher* (Buchanan & Tomas, 2019). The aforementioned benefits range from improved student outcomes and enhanced principal wellbeing, to retention of principals in their jobs and increased attractiveness of the role to aspirants. However, the formal preparation of school principals is only a small part of a possible solution to this significant human resource issue.

As a 2019 recipient of the QASSP Travelling Scholar Grant, I was afforded the opportunity to explore this concept further and investigate the ways that systems – both domestically and internationally – are responding. While there is a gradual global movement to more considered principal preparation programs, uncertainty in how best to identify these aspirant leaders remains. I therefore sought to answer the question: What are the talent management processes that education systems use to attract teachers to the role of school principal, build their capacity to fulfil the role, and ultimately deploy them to where they are needed? This article reflects upon some of the responses undertaken by education systems both in Australia and abroad. The intent is to contribute furtherto this pertinent discussion in Queensland, especially as our system begins the process of implementing the priorities of the *Leadership*

Strategy 2020-2022.

Identifying Future School Principals

There are two distinct ideologies about how systems respond to the question of identifying the next generation of principals. The most common and historical approach is to recognise suitable applicants based on performance in a current role. High performers are those employees in an organisation who have an exemplary knowledge about their areas of expertise and continually demonstrate success within these limits. Simply put, employees who are doing well in their current job. Systems such as Singapore are exceptional at identifying their future leaders via use of extensive monitoring of the performance of educators, from the commencement of their degree. This tracking also encompasses progressive steps in middle leadership roles towards becoming a school principal.

There are significant benefits to this level of scrutiny, as systems already know the number and location of future vacancies, who might fill these vacancies and any further development needed for individuals to be successful in their future roles. The challenge for education systems is that the skill sets required of classroom teachers, or middle leaders, are significantly different to those required of school principals. Further, to continue to innovate and be agile within education, systems need to look beyond performance to identify 'high-potential' employees. While there are various definitions, the literature generally identifies these as employees who demonstrate three characteristics: **aspiration** (they have a focus on results and recognition, advancement and influence, intrinsic rewards, work-life balance and overall job enjoyment); **ability** (innate characteristics that include cognitive and emotional intelligence, and learned skills including technical, functional and interpersonal skills); and **engagement** (attributes of emotional commitment, rational commitment, discretionary effort and intent to stay) (Bridgespan, 2012; Johnson & Flückiger, 2018). This usually represents the top 3% to 5% of an organisation's pool of employees.

Typically, the identification of high potential involves the use of psychological assessments, external consultants, assessment centres and nomination processes. In education systems in Australia, identifying future school principals by exploring potential is only in its infancy. Queensland was one of the first systems to attempt this, with creation of the Future Leaders Program in 2015 (originally titled 50 Futures). Elements of assessing potential are also evident in Lead4QLD, the whole of government leadership framework (Queensland Government, 2019).

Victoria has continued the exploration of identifying potential, with their Unlocking Potential: Principal Preparation program (UPP) (Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership, 2019). One mechanism that is used effectively in Victoria is the Capstone Interview which can take several hours and includes opportunities to examine a candidate's ability to transfer performance skills to new situations therefore demonstrating their potential.

In the United States, assessing transferability of skills is often taken one step further. Districts engaged in the Principal Pipeline process (Wallace Foundation, 2019) not only have extensive leader tracking systems, but opportunities for aspirants to work shadow a mentor, then lead the school while the mentor is seconded to other roles in the district. This can be for a period of up to six months. Other US districts maintain strong partnerships with universities to provide one-year internships. This idea of an internship is also used in Victoria through the UPP, although normally restricted to between two to six weeks.

Developing Future School Leaders

No matter whether an education system identifies future leaders by their current performance or their potential, a challenge regularly identified is how to effectively develop the leaders of tomorrow from early in their careers. Again, there are two ideologies regarding the development of school leaders before appointment or promotion. These are along a spectrum that ranges from 'inclusive' approaches to development through to 'exclusive' practices.

An exclusive approach implies that an organisation systematically and deliberately identifies high potential and high performing candidates to fill key positions and targets specific development for these individuals. In many respects this approach is about meeting the needs of an organisation. It is different to the general management and development of individuals as it makes a deliberate distinction between those with potential and the rest of the workforce (Roy & Devi, 2017).

Using an exclusive model to develop employees has been shown to be highly effective in attracting new employees, improving employee retention and fostering greater aspiration for future leadership. The model adopted by Singapore is highly exclusive, where the system is continuallyidentifying individuals and targeting their growth in readiness for the next position. The challenge for education systems in adopting exclusive practices, is that many of the underlying principles operate in direct contrast to one of the core values held by educators – egalitarianism.

In contrast, an inclusive approach is targeted at building the capability of the entire workforce, for overall employee outcomes. It includes selective staffing, self-managed teams, decentralised decision making, extensive training and management development, flexible job assignments, open communication and performance related pay. These elements are interdependent in that the inclusion of one element requires the inclusion of others. Inclusive practices are often linked to self-selection and nomination. The practices adopted by the Victorian UPP and Queensland's Take the Lead, while still having evidence of an exclusive approach, are more flexible and inclusive, with candidates of these programs identified by system leaders and self-nomination.

Conclusion

Whether an education system is identifying future leaders based on their potential or performance and where the approach sits along the inclusive to exclusive spectrum, one thing is evident across all systems explored. There needs to be a greater focus on building the capacity of existing school principals to identify the leaders of tomorrow. It is important to build clarity regarding what the role will require, how to identify these skills early in teachers' careers, and how to build the capacity of aspirant leaders. In other words, we need principals who can identify and manage talent.

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