

Reading 11

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Strategy and the School Principal

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the initial stages of research on the strategic role of primary school principals in New South Wales. Strategy, a leadership dimension present in all leadership theories and perspectives, holds the key to effectively linking the actions of today with the future. This study draws on a theoretical framework derived from a comprehensive review of literature, previous case studies and doctoral work undertaken by the author. Attempts are made to explicitly link the strategic role of school leadership with the principles of Catholic Education.

The findings suggest that the very concept of strategy remains elusive to scholars and practitioners alike. Researchers have tended to focus on planning as the sole source of strategy and consequently practitioners have been led to believe that this is their strategic role. This paper argues that by broadening an understanding of the concept of strategy, practitioners and scholars can gain greater insight into the strategic role of the educational leader. A more holistic understanding of the strategic dimension of educational leadership will provide leadership theorists, systemic authorities, and practitioners - the ones who grapple with enormous complexities posed by strategy - with a knowledge and understanding of the strategic role within Catholic Educational leadership more positively into the future.

Introduction

The conceptualisation of 'strategy' as a construct is far more abstract than is typically depicted in literature and practice. Strategic actions are purposeful, deliberate and meaningful, with the desired goal of linking the present with a desired future state. The word 'strategy' is now applied to almost every management activity to add misleading rhetorical weight (Beaver, 2000). This has devalued and misrepresented the concept and is damaging to both theory and practice. According to Forde, Hobby & Lees (2000), strategy is overrated as a feature of good leadership compared to the less dramatic activity of developing capability. This criticism of the concept only highlights the present low level of understanding.

Strategy has always been considered the queen of the managerial disciplines (Boisot, 2003). Many of the misconceptions about strategy begin with its use in the corporate sector. Bush (1998) argues that schools are too different from commercial companies in the nature of their business for direct sharing of concepts. Kelly (2005) argues that business leaders develop strategy, whereas educational leaders develop people. However, recently Davies & Davies (2006) highlighted that strategic leadership is not a new categorisation of leadership, but a key dimension of any leadership activity. Eacott (2006) has labelled it an

educational leadership 'imperative'. From this perspective, strategic leadership is present in all theoretical perspectives of leadership, irrespective of the sector. In addition, leading strategically is essential for the effective management of educational institutions.

The concept of strategy

Despite being part of educational administration since the mid-1970s (El-Hout, 1994), strategy as an explicit tool for leading and managing an educational organisation is of recent origin in both theory and practice. It first appeared in the educational administration literature in the 1980s. However, there was very little prior to 1988 (Fidler, 1989), when the United Kingdom (UK) passed the *Education Reform Act*, making it mandatory for all schools to have a development plan. In a recent review of literature on strategy in education, Eacott (2008) found that 90% of the literature emerged following this date and over 60% of works originated in the UK.

Unfortunately, much of this voluminous literature focused very narrowly on the planning process to the exclusion of other aspects of strategy. Bell (1998) argued that 'strategy' and 'planning' became synonymous. However, the term "strategy" or "strategic" was applied to almost every management activity by practitioners, consultants and academics to add importance to the process. Fortunately, insightful academics realised that many of the works during the formative years (1988-2000) of strategy in educational research (Eacott, in press) had produced insufficient knowledge. Following a special issue of *School Leadership and Management* in 2004, edited by Brent Davies, a conceptual shift in the understanding of strategy has begun to emerge.

Dimmock & Walker (2004) criticised contemporary strategy research for its tendency to connect strategic thinking to improvement planning, for the undue attention and focus currently given to particular indicators and criteria as underpinning drivers of strategy and strategic thinking and for the tendency for recent literature on strategy to neglect the relevance of the cultural context of each school.

Central to the shift in thinking and recent interest in strategy and schools was the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) funded project, *Success and Sustainability: Developing the Strategically Focused School* (2005) co-ordinated by Davies, Davies & Ellison. Through this project and related publications (Davies, 2003; Davies & Davies, 2004; Davies, 2004; Davies & Davies, 2006; Davies, 2006) these authors developed a comprehensive framework for strategy in schools consisting of strategic processes, approaches and leadership. It produced a series of behavioural characteristics that effective strategic leaders display. Central to these findings was that strategic leadership is not a new theory, but an element of all educational leadership and management theories (Davies & Davies, 2006).

Strategy and schools

Griffiths (1985) has raised concerns regarding the unquestioned adoption of terms from the corporate world into educational administration. Thomas (2006) also warns of the seduction of jargon from elsewhere in the field of educational leadership. Commonly, criticism of strategy, strategic management and strategic leadership begin with the central argument that schools are about learning and teaching, not corporate management and that corporate models remove the leader's attention away from being an instructional leader.

The core assumptions of this criticism are conceptually misplaced. Schools are traditionally viewed as under-led and under-managed organisations characterised by their core business of teaching and learning (Bain, 2000; Dimmock & Walker, 2004; Dimmock, 2000; Weick, 1976). The traditional view of organisations and strategy is to see the organisation as the machine that turns resources into products, and strategy as the instrument for positioning the focus organisation in the industry and marketplace (Løwendahl & Revang, 1998). Unfortunately, the self-taught educational leader or even the teaching of strategic leadership to school personnel is generally from a mechanistic perspective or what Levačić & Glover (1997; 1998) term a 'technicist-rational' approach. This approach presents strategy to school leaders as a mechanistic pursuit towards the production of a plan. The underlying assumptions of strategy and the strategic leadership of schools are viewed as 'strategic rationality' (Finkelstein & Hambrick 1996, p. 337). From this perspective, the leader's task is to identify techno-economic opportunities and problems, systematically search for alternatives and make choices that maximise the performance of the organisation. This perspective forms the basis of criteria from which school development plans in the UK are assessed during inspection (Broadhead, Cuckle, Hodgson & Dunford, 1996; Cuckle, Hodgson & Broadhead, 1998; Cuckle & Broadhead, 2003).

This view of strategy is extremely narrow and conceptually flawed. Figure 1 shows an organisational hierarchy that highlights the location of the institution's strategic direction and strategic plan. The only aspect of the organisation higher than the strategic direction is the 'purpose'. After all, the purpose is the rationale for the creation of an educational institution. The strategic direction establishes the desired future state of the organisation. How to go about producing this strategic direction is the role of strategic management models. Conventionally, a variety of strategic management tools, such as SWOT analysis, Boston Consultancy Group Matrix, Nominal Group Technique, Surveys, Fishbone Diagrams, are employed to establish a direction. This desired future state is the core principle informing the policy framework of the institution. All policies within the organisation need to reflect the strategic direction of the organisation. This link should be explicit and deliberate. The strategic plan (three to five years into the future) should be guided by the policy framework and clearly outline the course of action to be taken by the organisation in the pursuit of the strategic direction, although not necessarily in explicit detail. The strategic plan is the guiding force behind the operational plan

(up to two years into the future). The operational plan outlines the course of action for the immediate future and contains greater detail than the strategic plan. Faculty plans outline how particular sections of the organisation are working towards the achievement of the operational plan within the framework of the strategic plan. This level of the hierarchy is of considerable importance in the development of strategic capability in others. The faculty plan should provide a framework to guide the day-to-day actions of every person within the organisation. This model clearly demonstrates the role of strategy within an educational institution, from its purpose through to the daily operations.

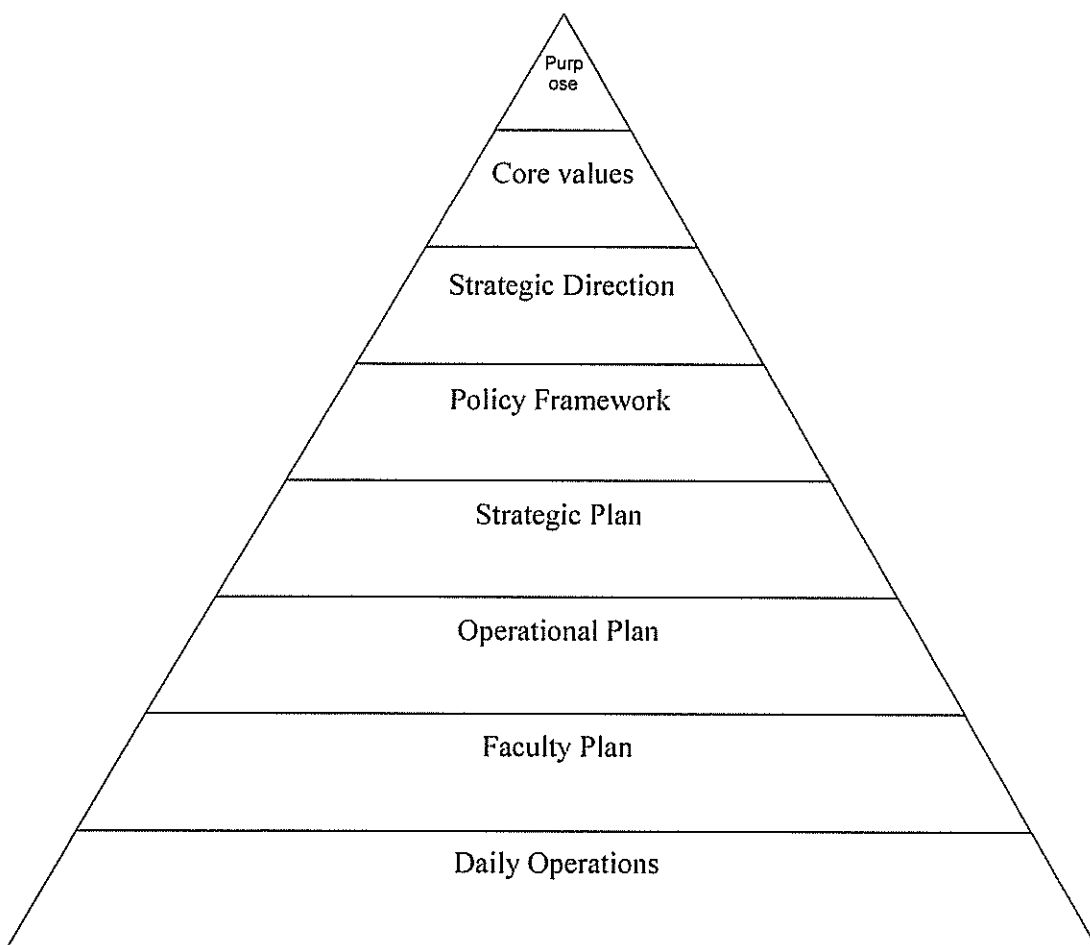


Figure 1: The location of strategy within an organisational hierarchy

Strategy and Catholic Education

Before exploring a framework for strategic leadership in schools, it is important to establish the unique role of strategy in Catholic education. Catholic schools have been a major part of Australian education for over 175 years (<http://www.cecnsw.catholic.edu.au/>). They continue to respond to, and to serve, the needs of parents who seek a Catholic education for their children. The NSW Catholic Education Commission states that Catholic schools are distinctive because they:

- Promote a particular view of the person, the community, the nation and the world, centred on the person and teachings of Jesus Christ;
- Challenge students to find, through God, meaning and value in their lives;
- Form an integral part of a church community in which all generations live, worship and grow together;
- Critique our culture, and challenge community values, as an integral part of their Gospel mission;
- Aim to be welcoming and reflective communities whose most distinctive sign is the discernment of God's presence and their spiritual life;
- Espouse values which unite Australia by promoting a citizenship infused by a commitment to social justice;
- Encourage students to develop an international perspective on their own country and how their country can identify and respond justly to its international obligations;
- Develop a sense of historical perspective by reflecting on the development of societies and cultures over time, a story of human frailty but of continual efforts to live the Gospel message; and
- Give priority to educating the spiritually and financially poor and being their advocates (www.cecnsw.catholic.edu.au).

However, one of the greatest challenges is the preservation and strengthening of Catholic identity in schools so that a school's Catholic identity and spiritual capital is evident and transmits the Catholic culture to the entire school community (Belmonte, 2007). English (2005) cites identity formation for parents and school communities as a key to success in non-government schools. It is unquestioned that the strategic role of the principal (Cranston, 2006) is pivotal to successfully achieving identity creation. A school leader's task is to see that the entire school community does not lose sight of the need to develop all aspects of the school's purpose (Boyd, MacNeill & Silcox, 2006). This position is highlighted in the increasing number of lay principals in Catholic schools. Table 1 shows the changing number of principals in New South Wales Catholic schools, 1998 - 2005.

Table 1: NSW Catholic School Principals Religious / Lay

Category	1988	1990	1995	2000	2005
Male Religious Principals	70	68	47	35	25
Female Religious Principals	177	165	78	48	23
Total Religious Principals	247	235	125	83	48
Male Lay Principals	190	178	236	264	266
Female Lay Principals	163	180	230	242	271
Total Lay Principals	353	359	466	506	537
TOTAL PRINCIPALS	600	591	591	589	585

Catholic Education Commission NSW (www.cecsw.catholic.edu.au)

To overcome these challenges, an educational leader needs to build a Catholic faith community identity within the entire school community to work in partnership with parents, the parish and the wider community and to foster an environment built on student-centred learning and the professional development of staff. To be successful in meeting these challenges, the educational leader must initiate purposeful, deliberate and meaningful actions with the goal of linking the daily operations of the school with the moral purpose of the organisation.

A framework for strategy in education

The majority of models proposed for strategic leadership are linear. The core logic of the framework provided within this paper is that strategic leadership is iterative and cannot be solely confined to a linear model. However, when the model was first developed (Eacott, 2004) it was a four step, linear cycle. Further research and development have led to its current modelling (Figure 2). For those seeking a linear model, envisioning would be the starting point followed by the other elements, moving clockwise in the diagram. But it cannot be stressed enough that the process of strategic leadership is iterative and movement can occur within any feature of the process at any time.

Envisioning requires the principal and school community to think about the future of the school. When an enrolling parent walks into the school, the staff and other key personnel within the school should be able to articulate what the school is striving for and what parents can expect throughout their child's time at the school (Eacott, 2006b).

To undertake the process of envisioning requires critical reflection and reflective dialogue. This reflection needs to form the foundations of strategic thinking, moving the debates from the day-to-day to the future of the school and in time, to discuss and debate where the school is heading. Essential to this process is building metaphors or images of a desired future and ensuring that there is a shared conceptual or mental map of how to get there. There are many

different versions of how a school can establish a strategic direction / vision (Cheung & Cheng, 1996; Cheung & Cheng, 1997; Eacott, 2006b; Jordan & Webb, 1986; Kundu, 1991; Milliken & Gallagher, 1998; Pertridou & Chatzipangiotou, 2004; Sallis, 1990; Tsiakkiros & Pashiardis, 2002), however what is important, is the meaningful involvement of key stakeholders.

This leads to engagement. Research on effective schools has shown that parental involvement in decision-making and activities positively correlates with increased satisfaction and support for the school (Gamage, 1998). Similarly, staff participation is linked to job satisfaction, morale and building trust and confidence in leadership (Timperley & Robinson, 2000).

Engaging requires the school community to have strategic conversations, often led by the principal, but this does not have to be the case. These conversations build on critical reflection, establish purpose for actions and encourage a culture of reflection and dialogue on strategic matters and the future direction of the school. Involving as wide a group as possible provides richer sources of data on the school to inform discussion and debate. If done well, it can give others the feeling that their contribution is important, recognised and can make a difference. Effective engagement of others allows for the support, development and/or mentoring of other strategic leaders within the school.

Once the school has a strategy, it becomes the guiding framework for all decisions within the organisation (Eacott, 2004). Decisions made at the organisational, staff, student and community levels need to align with the overarching strategy of the institution (Eacott, 2006b). The systems and structures designed at the organisational level, for example, meeting structures, communication systems and decision-making models, need to reflect the institution's strategy. The professional learning opportunities offered to staff, pedagogical practices and annual reviews need to meaningfully reflect the overarching strategy. The expectation of students and their role within the organisation needs to reflect the basic premises of the strategy. In essence, the school's strategy becomes the blueprint for action (Fidler, 1989) or the touchstone to keep the school focused.

There are three inter-related levels within the articulating dimension: oral, written and structural. Oral articulation involves not only articulating the institutional vision/direction, but also bringing it to life through conversations and dialogue (Davies & Davies, 2006). Written articulation involves distinguishing between daily operations and strategic operations and articulating, in writing, a small set of deliverable objectives that the institution can achieve and on which it can focus its efforts. Structural articulation requires the school to be aligned (eg. curriculum teams or strategic priority teams) in a manner that is consistent with the strategic direction, and integrated into all aspects of organisational life. Dimmock & Walker (2004) discuss this concept from the perspective of a learning-centred organisation. An alternate lens for this is purposeful infrastructure.

Implementation is primarily concerned with how the school's strategy can be witnessed. Its central aspect is translating strategy into action, establishing frameworks and ensuring that they become actions. Building from other features, implementation requires that staff understand the school's strategy and maintain a commitment to enacting that strategy. However, as with the debate in change management discourses about change versus quality improvement, it is imperative that strategic actions aim to significantly improve current operations by developing the capabilities of others. The timing of implementation is also important. Actions may be sequential or parallel, but it is desirable that the principal initiate changes when the school needs them and before external constraints or conditions dictate them.

Due to the iterative nature of strategy as a process, monitoring and evaluation are two crucial elements for effective implementation. Educational leaders need to be constantly asking themselves and others, Where are we now? Where to next? How will we get there? How will we know when we get there? (Eacott, 2006a). There is a need for a transparent system of data collection to enable effective monitoring and predetermined points of evaluation. Vital to the success of this dimension of strategy is developing the analytical skills of others to ensure thorough evaluation. Essential elements of this dimension include: systematic monitoring procedures, continuous monitoring, evaluative judgments, and evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategy.

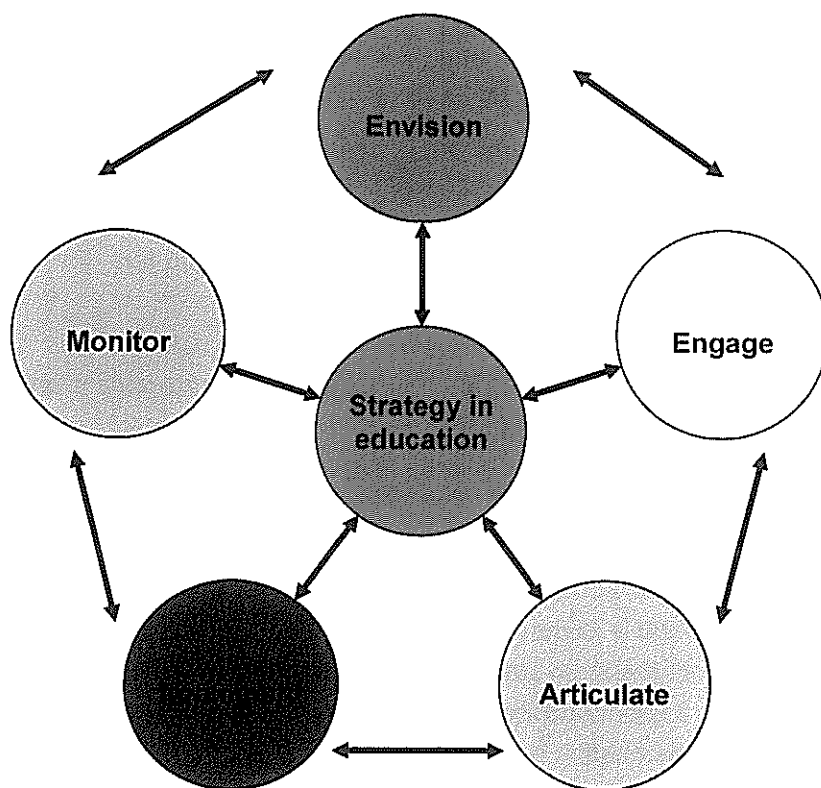


Figure 2: A framework for strategy in education (Eacott, 2007)

A key feature of the proposed framework for strategy in education is that it is not about strategic leadership or strategic management. Rather than becoming involved in a debate over leadership and management, this framework suggests that the strategic role of the principal is just that, a strategic role. An examination of popular leadership theories leads to an array of strategic actions. Further to this argument is the notion of the 'educational strategist'. Having moved beyond the strategic leader or strategic manager construct, is it possible to see the role of the school principal as one of educational strategist, where leadership behaviours and management processes are targeted towards the enhancement of the school's educational programs and most importantly towards student development. This suggests that the principal can draw on knowledge, understandings and skills from anywhere (including the corporate sector) as long as they are implemented in a manner that is consistent with the purpose and core values of the school. This is where a principal can have the most significant influence on the development of students.

Strategic operations

The previous sections outlined the role of strategy in schools. This section deals with the function of strategic operations. Rather than drawing on a particular model of strategic management, it proposes four inter-related levels within an educational organisation that must be considered during strategic processes. The relationships are portrayed as a flowchart in Figure 3.

The school's strategy remains the touchstone for action at all levels. In addition to providing guidance relating to actions undertaken, it also provides the guiding principles for establishing a set of expectations for practice and conduct. In essence, the flowchart becomes a strategic management/leadership tool for the school as an organisation to clearly articulate its expectations. Using a case study school from Eacott (2004, 2006b) as an example, the links become much clearer. The school wanted to be widely recognised and acknowledged for:

- Excellence of its programs to develop the entire student;
- Commitment of staff to professional growth, improvement and quality;
and
- The pride exhibited by students, teachers and community

(Eacott, 2006b, p.26).

Using the flowchart, the educational leader, through the effective use of strategic management tools and a committee, is able to establish a set of behaviours at each level that reflect the three strategic direction statements. For each statement, a list of behaviours as demonstrated at the organisation level, by staff, by students and by community members is developed. This list would be a working document that could be refined at any time. It would need to be distributed to incumbent staff, students and community members. In addition, it would serve as the primary

document for the induction of new staff and the orientation of any students and community members. The integration of the organisation's strategic direction into operational aspects assists in building a strategically-focused culture at all levels of the organisation.

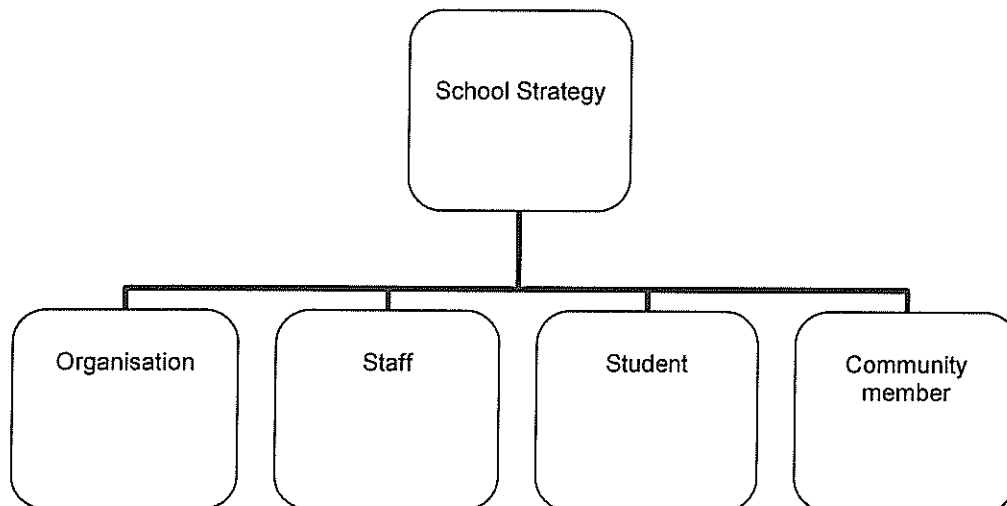


Figure 3: Inter-related levels of operation within a school

Strategically leading your school

Central to the success of any strategy is the implementation of strategic leadership. Pivotal to this implementation is the perception of causation by the leader. While the majority of the sources discuss strategic leadership within the domain of the 'leader', the leader and that leadership role is not restricted to the head of the organisation. Any individual within an organisation can act as a strategic leader and the school's leadership can change through the course of time. Causation and causal models of strategy have primarily focused on the dependence of strategy on the environment or organisational form and conduct (Eacott, 2008). However, if educational leaders shift their perception to a model where strategy is both dependent and independent at the same time, essentially enacting an interdependent model, strategic leadership is at its most effective. Figure 4 depicts the direction of the causation within the model. Weick (1995) explains that strategists act, and in doing so they create the constraints and opportunities they encounter. Pondy & Mitroff (1979, p. 17) define strategic leadership as an 'enacted phenomenon', one where strategists play a key role in producing the market they face. With this conceptualisation of causation, strategic leaders can effectively shape their environment which will then guide future strategy development. Through purposeful and deliberate actions, a strategic leader can affect school design, by structuring the organisation in a manner that is consistent with the strategic direction. Similarly, school design shapes the development of strategy. The environment, whilst initially acting as the stimulus for strategy development, can then be purposefully influenced

through effective strategic leadership. Similarly, the construct of school performance can be influenced through strategic action. While it is a basis for initial strategy development, effective leadership, particularly through school design and environmental influence, can have a positive effect on school performance and vice versa.

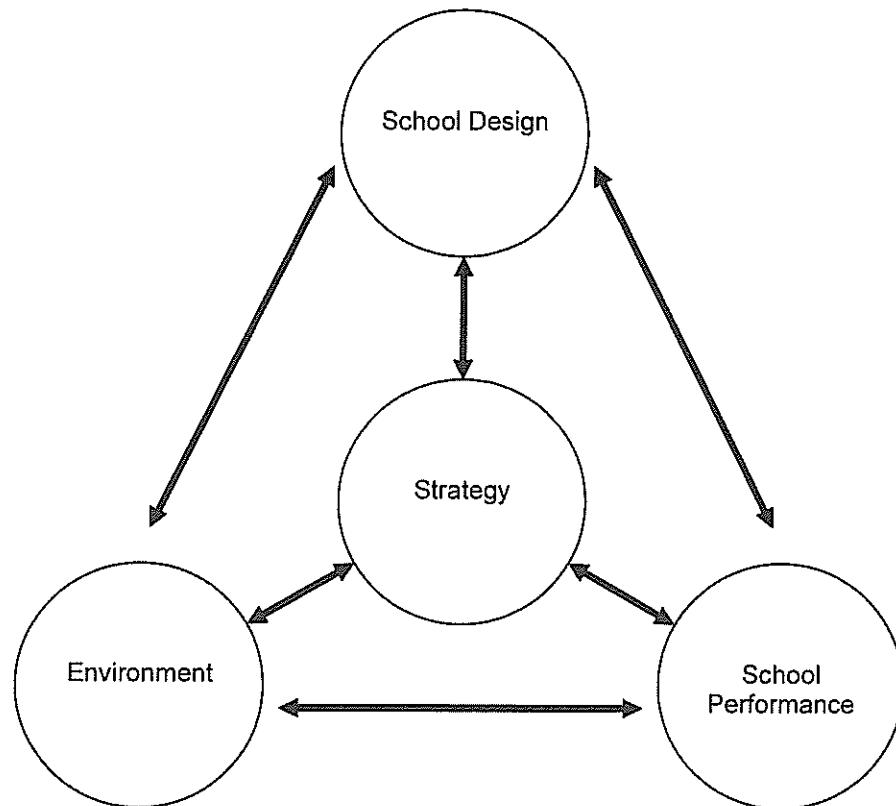


Figure 4: Causation model of strategy and school context

Strategic meetings

Meetings are an organisational necessity in many educational institutions and can be a highly productive means of information sharing and decision-making. However, in many schools, the organisational inertia of holding a number of weekly meetings can lead to unproductive meetings and substantial time wasting. The goal of this section is to outline a means of making meeting agenda and allocation of time more focused on the school's strategy. Gamage & Pang (2003) provide a comprehensive overview of other meeting-related matters. They discuss how the agenda is the blueprint for action in a meeting and the importance of ordering the agenda items.

In order to make meetings more strategic, primacy should be given to how the

school is currently progressing in relation to its strategic direction. Using a large primary school as an example, the initial period of time during an executive meeting, should be allocated to discussion, decision-making, monitoring and evaluation of strategic matters. Approximately a quarter to a third of meeting time ideally should be allocated to strategic implementation, monitoring and evaluation matters. At the faculty or sectional level, a similar approach could be taken. This promotes the strategic focus of all staff in working towards the school's strategic direction. At the school council level, a similar approach might be used. Professional learning opportunities offered to staff at whole school meetings could also have an explicit connection to the school's strategic direction. This model of meetings focuses the greatest number of participants on implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the school's strategic actions.

Sustainable strategic focus

In order to establish the strategically focused educational institution, it is essential to build it around sustainability. To create this sustainability the leader must integrate the organisational strategy as the central principle for organisational decisions and actions, and this must encompass the entire organisation, not just the executive. It is only then that the strategy becomes a shared responsibility. Through the development of strategic responsibility in others, the leader is building the capability of the entire organisation. This reflects a proactive approach to strategy implementation, monitoring and evaluation. By consistently reflecting on progress and re-evaluating the school's strategy, the leadership is actively driving the strategic journey rather than merely being a passenger. Truly sustainable leadership in the area of strategy requires a continual focus on the task at hand and a commitment to and protection of the integrity of the strategy.

Hargreaves & Fink state that most leaders want "to accomplish goals that matter, inspire others to join them in working toward those goals, and leave a legacy after they have gone" (2005, p. 13). All of this can be achieved through strategic leadership and a sustained focus on strategic priorities. However, only by utilising an appropriate strategic management model, strategic management tools, meetings and operational management can this be achieved by the leader and leadership team. It is not a job for the half-hearted and can take time to really effect organisation-wide change and focus. But to make the changes that matter and for those changes to spread throughout the organisation, and for them to last beyond the immediate, then strategic leadership is an imperative aspect of the educational leader's repertoire.

Conclusion

This paper considered the concept of strategy, its role in schools and developed a framework for the strategic role of the school leader built around operations, meetings and sustainability. Leading an organisation is a complex and ever-changing role that requires considerable focus, time and commitment. What is of

importance is to develop the knowledge, skills and understandings required to meaningfully energise and motivate others towards the achievement of organisational goals. Time spent thinking about and developing a style of leadership and management to do this, can prevent time and resource wastage. Giving appropriate attention to the model of management, conduct of meetings and organisational systems and structures should receive careful attention from leadership. Importantly, leaders are reminded of the importance of continual monitoring and evaluation in the constant quest for organisational improvement.

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