

# A LITERATURE REVIEW EXPLORING A MEANING FOR THE TERM 'CURRICULUM LEADERSHIP'

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**ABSTRACT** *Research on leadership in education often focuses on school management, educational change or curriculum development. There is little research however, in the area of curriculum leadership. With the introduction of seven new curriculum documents in the last eight years in New Zealand, I believe it has become increasingly important to consider who our curriculum leaders are, what it is they are leading, and the characteristics these people have that influence the practices and activities of others. In this article I have explored the roles of those people who might be considered to be curriculum leaders (Ministry of Education, School Support Services, Principals, Teachers, Consultants and Parents), in an attempt to define some of their leadership characteristics. I conclude the article with a summary of these characteristics.*

## INTRODUCTION

The research literature on leadership and curriculum is both vast and complex. Much of this research focuses on school management, principals as leaders in developing effective schools, educational change, curriculum development at a national and school level, and teacher development. Research on leadership in curriculum however, is limited. The intention of this literature review is to explore a meaning for the term 'Curriculum Leadership' by answering the following questions: Why do we need curriculum leadership?; Who are the curriculum leaders?; What is it they are leading? And, what are the characteristics of curriculum leaders?

## CURRICULUM

There are many definitions and interpretations of curriculum. McGee (1997), in describing curriculum as a field, suggests it is concerned with decision-making about worthwhile knowledge for children and students and why and how they should learn this knowledge. McGee also summarises the views of a number of writers across several decades and suggests a definition of curriculum as something that results from deliberate planning and decision-making. Henderson and Hawthorne (2000) provide the following definitions of curriculum as, "...a plan for a pedagogical journey toward the good life, or students' actual classroom engagement with ideas and ways of knowing...", and "...depending on national, state, and local policy, it may also be understood as a course of study, a syllabus, or a group of text books or tests" (p. 3).

The Ministry of Education (1993) has also provided a definition of curriculum as "...a set of national statements which define the learning principles and achievement aims and objectives which all schools are required to follow" (p. 4). They further define the school curriculum as "...the ways in which a school puts into practice the policy set out in the national curriculum statements"

(Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 4). Bell and Baker (1997) suggest a wider meaning to the term curriculum than that offered by the Ministry. They suggest curriculum can have multiple layers of meaning which may "...differ from the official or the teacher-intended curriculum" (Bell & Baker, 1997, p. 3). These layers, described by Begg (cited in Bell & Baker, 1997) include the planned, taught, learned, assessed and hidden curricula. The *planned* curriculum is what the teacher plans and intends to happen and the *taught* is what actually happens during the course of the lesson as it is influenced by the students' ideas, questions and needs. The *learned* curriculum is what the students actually take away with them, which may or may not be the taught curriculum. The *assessed* curriculum is that which the teacher assesses which does not necessarily reflect all that the students have learnt, and the *hidden* curriculum is the "...implicit and unintended learning which may occur" (Bell & Baker, 1997, p. 2).

For the purposes of this article, the term curriculum is interpreted as the national statements in the official curriculum and the ways in which they may be translated into the classroom via teaching approaches, learning activities and practices; an interpretation similar to that described by the Ministry of Education (1993).

## LEADERSHIP

Two forms of leadership discussed by a number of authors are transactional and transformational leadership (Henderson & Hawthorne 2000; Leithwood, 1992; Mitchell & Tucker, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1990). Leithwood (1992) suggests transactional leadership "...is based on an exchange of services ...that the leader controls..." while transformational leadership "...provides the incentive for people to attempt improvements in their practices" (p. 9). Transformational school leaders are seen to promote a collaborative culture, foster teacher development and promote group problem solving. It is this form of leadership that Leithwood (1992) suggests may help teachers to make changes to instructional behaviour - something that is related to leadership in curriculum.

It is Henderson and Hawthorne's (2000) description of transformative curriculum leadership however, that best encapsulates the main elements of leadership that other writers have commented on. They suggest that transformative curriculum leadership has a core commitment to developing and enacting educational programmes and instructional interactions in the best interests of students; conveys the idea of continuous growth through inquiry; and is grounded in self and social examination. Transformative curriculum leaders "...work to include multiple perspectives, ...encourage creative problem solving, and ...nurture critical thinking" (Henderson & Hawthorne, 2000, p.vii).

A concept of curricular leadership is also discussed by Fidler (1997) as instructional leadership which, as he points out, is the title given to curricular leadership in the US. Fidler (1997) describes curricular leadership as a concept which implies "...that the headteacher has an impact on the professional work of the school, including the teaching and learning which goes on in the classrooms" (p. 30). He presents two points of view from which instructional leadership can be considered, one which takes a functional approach and one which takes a process approach. The functional approach involves leaders in defining the school mission, managing curriculum and instruction, supervising teaching, monitoring student progress and promoting an instructional climate. The process approach looks at ways this might be accomplished. Fidler (1997) summarises the

components of this approach using Firestone and Wilson's (1985) bureaucratic, interpersonal and cultural linkages (discussed below). It is the process approach however, that Fidler considers important as he suggests leadership comes from the *way* the tasks in the functional approach are achieved rather than achievement of the individual tasks themselves.

### **Why we need Curriculum Leadership**

If the purpose of schooling is to "...adequately prepare students for life in a world that is becoming increasingly complex" (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997, p. 96) then principals, teachers and other education professionals must constantly strive to provide the most relevant and up-to-date programmes they can. Sergiovanni (1996, p. 184) suggests that

Leadership must be viewed as one important part of the web of moral obligations that administrators, teachers, parents, and even students must accept...One part of this obligation is to share in the responsibility for exercising leadership. The other part of this obligation is to share in the responsibility for ensuring that leadership, whatever its source, is successful...In this redefinition, teachers continue to be responsible for providing leadership in classrooms...Similarly, administrators, parents, and teachers must accept responsibility together for the provision and the success of leadership.

In order for this to happen, there must be on-going curriculum development, and principals and teachers must continue to develop their own personal professional knowledge, skills and understandings. One way to promote this on-going professional development might be through the use of curriculum leaders.

### **Who are the Curriculum Leaders and What are They Leading?**

It has been suggested above that leaders are people who engender a sense of purpose, influence people towards achieving goals and making improvements in their practice, and that curriculum is that which is translated from the national statements. Curriculum leadership therefore, might well be found at many levels within the education setting where curriculum material is being implemented. While much of the literature focuses on principals as leaders, a number of authors have pointed out that there are many other people within the educational setting who have leadership responsibility. Sparks and Hirsh (1997) identify superintendents, curriculum supervisors, principals and teachers as having a leadership role to fill. In a New Zealand context, superintendents and curriculum supervisors may well equate to Ministry of Education representatives and School Support Services advisers (formerly the Education Advisory Service). Within the school context teachers also play an important curriculum leadership role (McConnell, Robertson & Strachan, 1994; McGee, 1997; Wilson, 1993). This is one opportunity that teachers have to develop their leadership. According to Fidler

Although leadership from senior figures is important, many other positions and individuals should be encouraged to provide leadership for particular tasks or particular sections of the school. This has the

capacity both to benefit the school and also to prepare such individuals for future more senior leadership opportunities (Fidler, 1997, p. 35).

The literature also makes indirect references to consultants or outside facilitators as leaders. The following discussion attempts to describe those who might be considered to be curriculum (or instructional) leaders and what it is they are leading.

#### *Ministry of Education and Curriculum Implementation*

The Ministry of Education provides curriculum leadership in two ways: through the development of national curriculum statements and, through the letting of contracts for implementation of these statements and the subsequent development of support material. In discussions with current and former curriculum writers and contract leaders, it has become clear that these people see themselves as curriculum leaders.

One writer discussed how his involvement in the writing of a new curriculum statement had allowed him the opportunity to engage in a discussion about the subject with teachers and fellow colleagues. A resultant effect of this was development of knowledge and understanding of the particular subject area for these people. In some cases, this resulted in changes to classroom practice and prompted these people to seek further opportunities for involvement in curriculum development. This is one form of curriculum leadership.

Contract leaders provide and promote leadership through the use of facilitators. Facilitators, who are most often teachers released from their classrooms for the duration of the contract, become heavily involved in developing their own skills and promoting leadership in other teachers. During the course of their involvement, whether implementing curriculum or developing resources, the facilitators are upskilled in knowledge of the particular subject area and approaches to curriculum delivery. They are involved in tasks such as facilitating workshops for teachers, principals and occasionally Boards of Trustees, leading staff meetings, working with and supporting lead teachers and other teachers in schools and, in some cases, may be involved in trialing material in their own classrooms. It is worth noting however, as one contract leader pointed out, these facilitators do not question what they are delivering, they just deliver. The intent of the documents they are implementing, the core concepts, principles and philosophies are already established. The facilitators role is one of creating an awareness of curriculum documents, helping teachers to understand the inherent philosophies and concepts of these documents and assisting them in successfully implementing them in their schools and classrooms.

Gilbert and Bell (1993) have summarised the tasks of facilitators and have identified many of the same roles including: a manager of learning activities; a facilitator of teachers' personal and conceptual development; a developer of the teachers' classroom activities and knowledge of teacher development; a member of the group; and a developer of teachers as facilitators. However, in a later article, Barnett and Bell (1997) have suggested a number of additional roles and qualities of facilitators. Many of the roles are similar to those described by the contract leaders and include organising the development programme, running workshops, working with and supporting teachers in schools, developing and suggesting relevant resources and acting as a catalyst at group meetings. The qualities include familiarity with curriculum documents, sound communication skills, open-

mindedness, awareness of the diverse needs of teachers, familiarity with support resources, sound classroom teaching experiences and team-work skills. These are similar to many of the qualities of principals and teacher leaders identified by other writers.

### *School Support Services*

The other agency that is involved in curriculum leadership is School Support Services. Advisers that were consulted believed that they also provided curriculum leadership in almost everything they did. Although they did not have a generic job description, there is a similarity in the activities that they carry out as a part of their advisory role. One adviser suggested that her role included: investigating, exploring and finding out about her own curriculum subject and disseminating these ideas to teachers; taking ideas from research and presenting it to teachers in an understandable form; participating at conferences as a way of gathering information; talking with teachers about curriculum content and delivery at the next level up from the day to day level; and getting involved in action research with teachers and children. Research supports the importance of a curriculum adviser on influencing the classroom practices of teachers; suggesting their role is indeed one of a curriculum leader (Fidler, 1997).

### *Principals as Curriculum Leader*

The principal as an instructional leader has been the subject of much research (Cawleti, 1982; Firestone & Wilson, 1985; Hallinger & Murphy, 1987). In fact, Firestone and Wilson (1985) have suggested principals can influence the quality of instruction by working through bureaucratic, interpersonal and cultural linkages. Bureaucratic linkages are the formal arrangements of the school which includes the rules, plans, supervision and administration which allow the school to operate. Interpersonal linkages are those which involve one-to-one interactions that directly influence teachers' classroom practice. Cultural linkages refer to the principal's ability to affect how teachers think about their job and their commitment to it. It is this role that Firestone and Wilson (1985) suggest "...work[s] directly on people's consciousness to influence how they think about what they do" (p. 13). The ministerial and pedagogic roles described by Sergiovanni (1996) have many similarities to these bureaucratic and cultural linkage roles. Sergiovanni's ministerial roles include things such as purposing, maintaining harmony, institutionalizing values, motivating, managing, explaining, enabling, modelling and supervising. The pedagogic role is one of ensuring that the interests of children are served well (Sergiovanni, 1996). Fidler (1997) suggests that although the principal plays an important role in curriculum leadership it was other factors, such as the school culture, that had a more direct influence, "Thus although the principal had some influence directly on students and teachers, curriculum leadership was mainly achieved by a more indirect process of working with and through Heads of Departments and influencing the school's culture" (Fidler, 1997, p. 34).

The principal also provides indirect curriculum leadership through for example: the establishment and maintenance of culture through the development of a vision, shared goals and sense of mission (Bush, 1995; Hall & Ramsay, 1994; Leithwood, 1992a); the development of collegial relationships by attending to individual and group needs and involving all teachers (Bredeson, 1995; Hall and

Ramsay, 1994; Leithwood, 1992a; Stoll, 1992); and the development of collaborative learning environments that promote open and clear patterns of communication (Bredeson, 1996; Bush, 1995; Hall and Ramsay, 1994; Sergiovanni, 1996; Stoll, 1992; Wideen, 1992; Wiggins, 1994). School leaders do contribute to the effectiveness of their schools by "...influencing teachers' adoption and use of innovative classroom practices... [and] highly effective school leaders demonstrate high levels of commitment to goals of the school, especially instructional goals" (Chapman, 1993, p. 210). Some of the ways they do this include articulating an overall vision for the school, setting high professional standards for goal achievement and using participatory decision-making selectively but frequently (Chapman, 1993) and by also fully involving teachers in the process (McEvoy, 1987).

#### *Teachers as Curriculum leaders*

It is not only those in formal leadership positions that provide curriculum leadership, teachers do too, for their colleagues and their students. For example, Wiggins (1994) believes teachers should become instructional leaders to "...expand their own knowledge base and ... come to a better understanding of their own conceptualization of teaching" (p. 19), and that this leadership should not always come from a source outside of the teacher. Supporting and leading colleagues in a specific curriculum area is one way that teachers can demonstrate their curriculum leadership (Hargreaves, 1992; Smylie & Denny, cited in Kowalski, 1995) and that the role of teachers in curriculum leadership is crucial to its success (McGee, 1997). However, for teachers to be properly prepared to take up a curriculum leadership role then professional development, which increases the knowledge and skill base of teachers so they may become more effective at meeting the needs of all students, is needed (Fullan, 1995). Some of the ways Fullan proposes this can happen include teachers: taking some responsibility for developing collaborative cultures and changing the norms and practices of the school; leading the way in being continuous learners and being driven by the moral purpose of making a difference to the lives of all students, "...moral purpose...must be an integral part of the conceptualization of teacher leadership" (Fullan, 1995, p. 234). While much of the discussion here has been about teachers as individual curriculum leaders curriculum teams can also provide leadership in curriculum development and implementation in schools (Hord & Poster, 1993).

#### *Consultants as Curriculum Leaders*

Another group that plays an important role in curriculum leadership are consultants. Webb (cited in Ramsay, Harold, Hawk, Poskitt, Marriott & Strachan, 1992) identified five roles of the educational consultant which include being a role model, an information provider, a facilitator, a confidant and broker in the exchange of ideas. Consultants have also been described as people who create conditions for change and assist teachers to develop strategies for implementing change (Ramsay, et al., 1992). They work alongside teachers, providing training in specific skills and coordinating programme development efforts until the teachers concerned develop the skills and commitment necessary to maintain their own programme of development without assistance (Stewart & Prebble, 1985). In this way, consultants might be seen to provide a form of leadership which promotes

the development of curriculum by helping teachers to develop their own personal professional skills.

### *Parents and Community*

Finally, one group of people not yet considered in this article are the parents and communities that are a part of each school setting. It is my belief that while these people may contribute to the shaping of curriculum in the widest sense via their social and political influences, and in the narrowest sense in terms of the development of the school charter, their involvement in curriculum leadership within the school or classroom programme is limited. In some curriculum areas, parents or community members may well provide expertise in a particular learning activity, however, this most often would reflect a knowledge of the activity and not the curriculum and for that reason can not be considered as curriculum leadership. As Ramsay et al. (1993) point out parents are prepared to have some input into what is taught however, "...they believe[d] it [is] the teachers' job to develop and teach the curriculum..." (p. 135).

### **Characteristics of Curriculum Leaders**

Although the role of the leader is not easily defined, there are however certain characteristics which people in leadership positions have that influence the practices and activities of others. In this article, I have defined the term curriculum leadership by looking at those people within an educational setting who might be considered to be curriculum leaders. I now want to identify the characteristics these people display in their different roles.

Curriculum leaders have a sense of purpose and a clearly defined mission or direction - one that is set by the group rather than the individual. They involve people as much as possible in the change process and promote continual monitoring and review of programmes and practices. They model this by continually reflecting on their own teaching and assessment practices and encouraging others to do the same.

Curriculum leaders also use effective interpersonal skills and establish climates that build consensus, empower others and promote open and clear communication patterns. They motivate colleagues to attain goals and encourage discussion, collaboration, shared decision-making and problem solving and are also concerned with curriculum implementation. They help teachers to better understand the philosophies and intent of curriculum documents, provide assistance in implementing curriculum and resource materials, and model appropriate behaviours and practices in curriculum delivery. As a part of this, curriculum leaders are also concerned with informing colleagues of professional opportunities and disseminating professional and curriculum material.

These characteristics are by no means definitive. Definitions of leadership and curriculum are diverse and there is no one right way to be a curriculum leader. As Fidler (1997) has pointed out "...composers use the same 12 tone scale but the music produced can be very different. The results produced by leaders using the same actions in different combinations and ways may be equally variable" (p. 35).

Finally, while I have identified some of the characteristics of curriculum leaders, research is needed on curriculum leaders in action to identify effective practices. A more in-depth look might also enable a comparison to be made

between leaders who demonstrate the same characteristics and the possibility that they may obtain different results as suggested by Fidler (1997).

## CONCLUSION

Leadership in the area of curriculum is increasingly important as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and look for ways to improve our programmes and practices. Identifying the characteristics of successful and effective leaders, and utilising this knowledge in developing and implementing curriculum documents and resources, might help us to better meet and respond to the changing needs of our children, teachers and schools of tomorrow.

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