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Principals, Politics and Change:

Confronting School Resilience to Radical Renewal

Karen Starr, Deakin University, Australia

Abstract

Governments expect school principals to lead and manage significant change to implement school improvement agendas. Research evidence suggests, however, that schools are slow to change (Evans, 1996; Duignan, 2006), that many teachers resist change (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005), and that change is often cursory or short lived – not disrupting dominant cultures and existing arrangements (Johnson, 2004). This paper discusses the resistance to major change encountered by Australian principals, and their perceptions of its causes. Emergent themes demonstrate that the success or otherwise of change rests heavily on the political astuteness of principals, which suggests the need for ongoing professional learning and leadership support around the issue of leading and managing change.

Key Words: change, politics, micro-politics, educational leadership, principals, resistance, power.

Introduction: the imperative for change

At the heart of leadership is change. (Bray, 1994, p. 143)
Change is not merely one of the issues on the CEO's agenda, it *is* the CEO's agenda.
(Nadler & Tushman, 1995, p. 33)

This paper discusses practicing principals' experiences in overseeing major change, the politically-motivated behaviours they have witnessed in others and their personal views about the causes of resistance to radical renewal. It discusses issues of leading major school change which are often avoided or elided by researchers or research subjects.

School principals are pivotal agents in school reform and key to the successful implementation of educational change to bring about improved student learning outcomes (Barty *et al*, 2004). Principals who can demonstrate oversight and responsibility for major change are perceived as being successful (Dlott, 2007). This is a critical factor for Australian principals since performance appraisal is tied increasingly to demonstrable school improvement, measured primarily by student achievement results. Besides meeting compliance requirements, forging improvement is the foremost aspect of leadership, yet the process of successful change is still shrouded in mystery and change efforts inevitably confront obstacles and set-backs (Grey, 2005). It is not easy for organizations of any kind to change, but schools have particular characteristics that make change extremely difficult to manage (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006; Sarason, 1982). This is especially true in Australia, where a succession of rapid educational reform agendas, from both state and

Commonwealth governments has occurred over the past three decades (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007). However, there has been little research about resistance to change in schools and the political skills required of principals who lead and manage change.

The paper refers to major or 'second order' change. First order change modifies or adjusts existing practices to improve effectiveness without significant alteration or affecting the ways in which work is conducted. Second order change, however, is much more political and affects larger numbers of people. It involves systematic, organizational restructuring, fundamental shifts in goals, beliefs, values, structures, cultures and procedures and entails radical departures from usual practice. Nearly all reforms and restructuring efforts by Australian governments over the past two decades have been second order in intent, and have heralded dramatic changes in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and the nature of educators' work (Duignan, 2006). These mandated, externally imposed reforms may be extrinsic to a school's self-determined change agendas and coincide and compete with other change initiatives. Some reforms are more successful than others and some schools adopt and adapt to change more successfully than others. However, the enormous shifts that are required of second order change largely explain why some schools do not transform to meet the intentions of policy makers.

Major change is often the result of a destabilizing event which creates organizational disequilibrium and hence the need to adapt, adjust or renew (Phipps & Gautrey, 2005). Such destabilizing catalysts can be created by macroeconomic forces such as changed regulation or legislation, technological advancements, market competition, mandated curriculum revisions or micro-level events such as the arrival of a new school leader, and often through more than one destabilizing factor. Irrespective of the origins of the imperative, a critical capability of principals is to lead and manage change.

The research

The data emerged from a two-year study conducted into the learning requirements of school principals. Newly appointed principals and very experienced principals from across Australia were interviewed to canvass each group's perceptions about the essential learning required to conduct the principalship successfully. Principals from all levels of schooling, all schooling sectors[1], and from metropolitan and rural locations were involved. Data collection occurred through intensive, semi-structured, recorded interviews with 100 principals (some conducted face-to-face and others via telephone), and through discussions and observations recorded as field notes. Forty one respondents were in the first two years of the principalship. Others had been in the role from eight to twenty eight years.

The research canvassed all aspects of the principalship, but the set of questions to which this paper refers related specifically to leading and managing change. The objectives were to:

- Examine principals' experiences in leading and managing major change

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[1] Government, Catholic and Independent Schooling sectors; Junior primary, primary, middle and senior secondary levels of schooling.

- Ascertain the obstacles to major change in schools
- Canvass the manifestations of change resistance
- Determine principals' perceptions about the causes of resistance to major school change.

Perspectives

At the basis of this study are the standpoints of its subjects, and the privileging of their knowledge, experience and agency. The meanings attached to social realities by actors in context are considered more significant than the interpretations of the observer. It is important not to lose sight of the relevance of everyday facts or to deny them epistemological consideration. The research eschews the severance of the private from the public in social life – both are political, but the private remains "undiscussable" (Argyris, 1998) with its relevance discounted if kept concealed.

The study reflects opinion, experience, subjective meanings and introspection. Real life is taken as a starting point with its subjective base and social interactions influencing each other (Said, 1994). Lived experience is the touchstone of reality, with the individual agent connected corporeally and emotionally to the structural, the social and the historical. In other words, large scale social structures affect tangible realities and therefore cannot be separated from contextualized practice or from the historicity of the period (Ball, 1994).

Method

Given these starting points, the research became an exercise in grounded theory building (Glaser and Straus, 1967). In this approach, theory emerges from the data gathered: theory is not derived deductively, but is generated through an inductive process whereby emerging research insights are analyzed and continually tested, producing further evidence and/or new theoretical insights (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The research is data-driven rather than theory-driven. The iterative process of developing claims and interpretations determines its own end point, when new data reveals no different insights but confirms theoretical elements already identified (Punch, 1998). Grounded theory is responsive to research situations and the people in it. This form of research supports examination of individual standpoint, complex contexts, and considers the inextricability of the macro, meso and micro (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

N-Vivo qualitative data software aggregated emergent themes, with initial data informing subsequent interview questions.

Below the research findings are discussed under headings which encapsulate the main themes that emerged: change resistance and its causes, the politics of resisting change, and principals' perceptions about why resistance to school change occurs.

What we know about school resilience to change

The most striking thing about change management is that it almost always fails.
(Grey, 2005, p. 97)

There are many different beliefs about 'resistance to change', and many conflicting definitions about what 'resistance' actually constitutes. Definitions include 'negative' actions and non-action, attitudes of ill will and resentment, and defensive or confrontational dispositions in the face of change. For example, Jermier, Knights & Nord (1994, p. 9) define resistance as "a reactive process where agents embedded in power relations oppose initiatives by other agents." Resistance stems from desires to challenge, disrupt and/or overturn organizational practices, discourses and power relations. Resistance in organizational life is widespread but under-appreciated, and resistance to change in schools is no exception (Jermier et al, 1994).

It is human nature to resist change (Evans, 1996) unless implementers are involved in its creation. Practitioners are comfortable with the way things are; they are familiar with the way things work, have established routines, and the school's cultural norms operate to maintain the status quo. When school leaders initiate change they are asking people to give up something – their feelings of comfort, long-held values or beliefs, or regular ways of working. The change may entail encountering a different environment or new collaborations. Whatever, there will be some break from the past, new effort and thinking required, and extra time needed to implement the new pursuit (Strebel, 2006). Major change creates confusion, suspicion and tension. It's easier to remain the same (Grey, 2005).

Some barriers to change relate to the nature of teachers' work[2]. Teachers' work is complex, demanding, requiring untold interactions each day with the increasingly diverse needs of large numbers of students, many of whom have learning or social difficulties. Students are becoming more demanding, harder to motivate (Evans, 1996) and teachers have to perform well in order to grasp and retain students' attention and cooperation. Curriculum expectations are constantly changing and expanding. On top are the daily unexpected requests, complaints, demands and queries from students, parents and others. Hence, the quotidian of schools is messy, busy, exhausting and stakeholders are many (Grey, 1996). Time for prolonged planning, reflection or problem-solving is always lacking.

Consider then the imposition of endless imposed mandatory change agendas with their short timelines, which add to workload and steal time from other school activities. The technical-rational-structural approach often adopted by education bureaucracies further exacerbates implementation problems. New policy initiatives or compliance requirements often assume a straight-forward, logical, predictable implementation with prescriptive timelines and procedures, but this fails to grapple with the complexity and dynamism of school life (Blackmore, 2004). The supposition is that a formula used in one context is transferable to others.

Another salient factor is that teachers are rarely involved in policy or change agenda formulation. They are acted upon – they are not co-sponsors of change. In this regard,

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[2] For an insightful discussion about the difficulty of making significant change in schools, see Evans (1996).

teachers are dealt with in a particularly shoddy way, often being portrayed as a part of the problem rather than the solution to educational problems (Starr, 2007a).

While issues of low morale and disengagement may emerge from the nature of teachers' work, change is not helped by media attacks from politicians and public commentators, or by the low esteem in which the public holds teachers (Starr, forthcoming, 2009). Politicians often cite purported problems in education with scathing venom to gain legitimacy for new reforms and restructurings, which erodes public confidence and teacher morale even further.

It is this history that makes some experienced teachers very cynical and resistant to change. Longstanding teachers are custodians of stories about the unintended, unanticipated, negative consequences or side-effects of change. Grey sums up thus:

> New techniques are announced with a great fanfare, and presented as the unproblematic solution to previous problems, but disillusion soon sets in ... Managers responsible for particular change programmes are likely, for career and identity reasons, to describe them as successful. Yet the everyday experience of people in organizations is that one change programme gives way to another in a perennially failing operation: nirvana is always just on its way. (Grey, 2005, p. 97)

These conditions are hardly conducive to change and innovation, and reform requires an atmosphere of trust (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Hargreaves and Fink, 2006).

Abelson (1995) argues that we are defined by our strongest beliefs as much as we are by our most valued possessions, and hence a challenge to our attitudes becomes a threat to our identity such that individuals will naturally mobilize resistance to such threats. Everyone is motivated by self interest, hence any change that individuals perceive to disadvantage them in some way may present a threat to be contested (Shapiro, Lewiki & Devine, 1995).

Resistance to change is, therefore, understandable. Change is about rocking the boat. For sanity and safety's sake, those whose working lives are spent in schools try to retain comfort and quell confusion through practising caution and constraint (Barth, 2007).

What forms of 'resistance' do school principals experience?

Given what we know from the literature about school resilience and resistance to change, it was perhaps not surprising to learn that new principals, and experienced principals who had accepted a new appointment, experienced the most severe and overt forms of resistance to change. In comparison, longstanding principals cited experiencing fewer major difficulties the longer their tenure. This indicates that school communities experience some difficulty in coming to terms with a new leader with new ideas and modus operandi, whereas over time, a leader becomes familiar and their views and processes are known. Furthermore, principals cite the beginning years of their time in schools as the ones where they undertake the most radical reforms or renewal programs.

But without exception, all principals experienced subversion and negativity when trying to achieve major school change, no matter how long they had been in the job. Resistance takes

many forms – some aggressive and violent, some silent and seething. Some of the worst stories from principals concerned illegal activities – often against them or their property. For example, one principal received death threats, a handful had their house or car vandalized, another experienced theft which he believed was sabotage. Others experienced opposition to their leadership: for example, one principal had a staff vote of no confidence presented to her governing council, a second had delegations of staff and parents confront her in her office, while another suffered the distribution of slanderous anonymous letters and posters. Some protesters seek restitution through power brokers such as school council chairs or other members of the school leadership team, in the belief that they can override the principal's intentions through disrupting their support networks. Principals commonly spoke of being the subject of dirty tricks or malicious gossip. Others dealt with unwanted and unnecessary media attention as resistors championed their cause. Regularly principals witnessed temper tantrums, physical outbursts such as slamming doors, faced difficult or embarrassing questions in public meetings, were aware of information being withheld from them, or were on the receiving end of insults and disingenuous remarks. When leading change, friendliness, common courtesy, sociability and solidarity often fly out the window (see also Griffin & Parker, 2003). Principals cited behaviours such as 'nit-picking' whereby dissidents try to find errors in everything s/he does or says, or demand precise information before detailed planning has commenced. As disenchantment sets in, productivity decreases and disengagement rises. Applications for transfer to other schools increase (see also Tucker, 1993). Every principal was aware of being undermined, sometimes from people on their leadership team or school councils, and felt that at times they were sidelined by being excluded through clandestine gatherings.

The principals in this study were most concerned about the behaviours they viewed as extremely irrational and destructive from people they referred to as "bulldogs", "one-eyed monsters", "anarchists", "trouble-makers", "the old guard", the "thorn in my side", the "pebble in my shoe", "workplace psychopaths" (see Clarke, 2005), "swamp-dwellers", "recalcitrants", "swashbucklers", "doomsayers" – those who hold up change processes and a school's progress while giving grief to those who lead and manage change.

Not one principal cited a 'hassle-free' second order change process. The following quotes provide examples of principals' experiences and the enervating efforts expended through oppositional pursuits:

> No matter how much I do, how thorough we are, how convincing the argument, whether we have any choice in the matter or not, major change upsets the apple cart. Some people won't change. They dig in their heels, and the stress goes up and down the line ... tempers fray and there's rudeness or passive resistance - things won't get done or work is held up. The atmosphere is unpleasant ... No matter how long I'm in the job, it's like that ... You get to expect it. (Principal, Western Australia)

> The games people play are unbelievable. You wonder – what happens to manners and a sense of perspective? Can't people see what needs to happen? But they won't see and don't want to see. They spend a lot of time and energy pulling in the opposite direction. (Principal, Victoria)

> There's a high price to pay ... 'doomsayers' defending the status quo to the death. They're a force to be reckoned with – every time ... It never gets any easier. (Principal, South Australia)

> I hate the word 'insubordination' – sounds like supreme power at the top, but I can't think of another word for it. There's outright refusal to co-operate, and blatant bending of the rules - subverting everything we try to do. (Principal, government school, Queensland)

> The 'old guard' are echo-chambers for each other. It's 'group think'. It's about being accepted by the crowd ... If individuals exercised independent thinking they might disagree with their mates. At lot of the time the rationale can be bleeding obvious but they can't be convinced. (Principal, Catholic school, Western Australia)

> You are appointed to make decisions, but 'the opposition' can make sure things don't happen the way you want them to – they get the union or the media or the parent body against you and make life extremely difficult." (Principal, government school, South Australia)

Principals express disappointment when teachers they respect assume the role of bystanders, allowing the bad behaviour of others to go without mention or question.

There are times, however, when oppositional 'group speak' does not prevail. Sometimes principals are surprised to find that resistors represent only a handful of staff. Several spoke about the 'silent majority' whose opinions come to the fore to enable change to occur:

> You can't ignore the wisdom of the silent majority. Sometimes you feel embattled but when it boils down to it, the majority of staff are actually on your side and they vote the change through. Opponents are loud, but can be a minority. This happens more often than you expect. (Principal, government school, South Australia)

> The majority don't speak out against their peers, but when it comes to a vote, the motion might get through despite the hoo-ha created by die-hards. I've learnt to ensure that voting is confidential - by ballot. Nobody has to justify to anyone else how they vote. It's the best way to quell opposition and the most rational decision comes to the fore. (Principal, independent school, Victoria)

One of the most difficult situations occurs when factionalism and division appears within the staff. Then there is more at stake for those holding strong views one way or another, and school leaders championing change find that factions harbour irreconcilable opinions and any sense of common purpose or collective vision dries up. As one principal put it:

> Insurgents become more defiant and unco-operative and rebellious ... they feel safety in numbers ... In my experience a splinter-group situation spells disaster for change because people are deliberately working at cross-purposes. (Principal, government school, New South Wales).

Principals often experience resistance dressed up as professionalism – as being performed in the best interests of students and the school. Given the 'ringleaders' are often perceived as 'difficult' or 'toxic' people, they are rarely given the benefit of the doubt – their operating in the school's best interests is not believed. Principals almost unanimously assume that resistant staff members are a nuisance - unyielding obstacles that "get in the way" of school improvement, wasting vast amounts of valuable time. Unions were commonly perceived in the same way: obstructing change as a matter of course, despite the benefits the change could create or the imperatives that may underpin change. One principal said:

> … it's their own self-interests they're protecting. They're holding the school back. You're up against these people and their union reps at every turn. It's a game and they have to make you do the jump through hoops. It's a power-play. (Principal, government school, Queensland)

The issue of blame must be acknowledged. Inherent in explanations are complaints – principals blame staff members (and sometimes others such as parents or school council members) for disrupting change and making their lives difficult. Principals suggest that staff members blame them and 'the Department' for being uncaring and not understanding the nature of their work, for being unresponsive and for making their work more difficult. Blame is a two-way street, with everyone claiming that their position is not understood or appreciated by other parties.[3]

Self-interest is at the basis of nearly all, if not all, political manoeuvres (Machiavelli, 1998). Some principals reported the politics of change in militaristic terms: a "battle of the wills", "a blood sport", "a fight to the death". They perceived the objective of the most aggressive resistors as being to derail them, and at least, to undermine their authority while blocking change objectives being reached. The view that "it's impossible to please everyone all of the time" prevailed. As Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley and Beresford (2000) state:

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[3] It is for this reason that some researchers eschew the notion of 'resistance to change' as it is commonly used. Rejected are the implicit hegemonic assumptions which serve the interests of the leaders and managers with power, whilst assuming that worker interests (in this case, mostly teachers) are obdurate and inconvenient and emanate from a stance of disobedience and antipathy (e.g. Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Merron, 1993). Others point out that 'resistance' takes on myriad behaviours, emotions and derives from various intentions, both good and bad (e.g. Foy, 1985; Piderit, 2000). From this perspective, subordinates are marginalised and useful possibilities for comprehensiveness and thoroughness in research about change in schools is foreclosed. So the concept of resisting change is a complex one, and responses by school leaders should not fall into the trap of oversimplifying the contestation about change in a dichotomous – "they're obedient or disobedient" – manner (Piderit, 2000). This paper focuses on the responses of school principals only, but it is important to keep in mind that there are always at least two sides to every question, and the views of other stakeholders may differ.

> There are no easy perfect answers. The world of schools, like those of classrooms, hold too many variables and few neat solutions … they reveal that effective leaders are not always successful at all times with all people and that a key characteristic is their determination and ability to continue to reconcile the irreconcilable. (Day et al, 2000, p. 157)

In some cases, principals cited internal problems which created or exacerbated school resilience to change, such as a lack of leadership team cohesion (more common that one might expect), high staff turnover, and insufficient agreement about long term strategy or vision.

Risk-free change is an oxymoron (Barth, 2007). Leaders have to address and manage resistance and deal with it appropriately, but meanwhile have to endure the bad behaviour of others. "It's a turbulent ride. You can never expose your true feelings or opinions or you won't last long." (Principal, Victoria).

Power struggles, rivalry and conflict, political intrigues, ideological differences and the manoeuvring of knowledge and personal agendas makes for micro-political messiness with which leaders have to contend (Punch, 1996). Organizational politics are inexplicably bound with power – the quest for it and the use of it (Griffin & Parker, 2003). It is to this topic, in the form of principals' perceptions about what motivates resistance behaviours that we now turn.

Perceptions about underlying causes of resistance behaviours

Principals have as many explanations about the causes of dissidence as they do stories of its manifestation. Disturbing is the view amongst longstanding principals that averse opinions and obstructionist behaviours have steadily increased over the years, and that now students and parents are as likely to dispute decisions or actions as are teachers and ancillary staff members. But several themes emerged during interviews about the causal factors behind opponency and obstructionism. Some of these themes are reminiscent of leaders' experiences of resistance over the decades (e.g. Coch & French, 1948; Lawrence, 1954; Mintzberg, 1983), while others appear to be a side effect of current educational policy and practice. Still others are indicative of changing social and cultural norms.

Negative cathexis surrounding leadership

Principals feel that something changes in the minds of others when they become 'the leader' of a school. People's perceptions change, and while most may be ambivalent about leadership, a few people attach negative connotations to 'the leader'. The interviewees in this study found this negative cathexis was less noticeable when they were leading teachers or deputy / assistant principals, but became undeniably noticeable when they entered the top job. This is one of the severest learnings for newly appointed principals – that is coping with the changed perceptions of others and their concomitantly changed behaviours. Experienced principals were used to the fact that many teachers did not regard them as "one of them" which led to oppositional behaviours. Principals said:

> You're the animal that's changed his spots. You're the same person with good intentions, but they distrust you and give you a wide berth when you're the principal. It's hard to get anyone but a deputy to sit next to you at the Xmas dinner. That's one of the things I've learnt – it can be lonely at the top but that's not entirely of your own making. (Principal, independent school, New South Wales)

> The biggest surprise was learning how hostile some people can be towards leaders. There's sexism and racism and ageism and all sorts of things wrapped up in this. But whatever it is, some aren't going to like or accept you as a leader. For them 'principal' equals 'enemy'. (Principal, government school, South Australia)

New principals expressed feeling vulnerable through political isolation. They were perplexed how their best efforts and well-intentioned plans could create such angst and anxiety. They were amazed when their magnanimous actions go unthanked or their motivations were questioned.

Hence there is a view amongst principals that resistance is not necessarily caused by the nature of the proposed change, but rather can be a deliberate action against the leader and his/her intentions (see Starr, 2000). This may explain similarities of leaders' experiences over the decades and in different countries and work contexts (e.g. Coch & French, 1948; Mintzberg, 1983; Lawrence, 1954). New principals are distressed by this perception and believe it to be "dangerous" and "worrying", yet fail to comprehend why it happens. One said, "You have to cope with the 'what', and the 'how, but the hardest thing is understanding 'why'".

A culture of complaint and litigation

Experienced principals look back over their many years in education and believe that once decisions were more readily accepted, especially by students and parents. Now stakeholders have higher expectations and a sense of their consumer rights when it comes to what they want of a school. Some particularly militant parents, for example, can activate a formal complaint or legal action against a school, or can instigate media attention. School leaders bear the brunt of such overt resistance which incurs additional work for them to save and repair reputations and a sense of order. A number of research participants believed that a culture of complaint has emerged, whereby legal or procedural rights will be more readily pursued to procure a desired outcome, and that complainants are more aware of and convinced of the effectiveness of these strategies. According to principals, threats of litigation are more common than actual cases, but formal complaints to external education authorities against the school are increasing, and protestors come from a diverse range of backgrounds. The following examples from principals explain these experiences and views:

> Parents demand to speak to me and no one else when they have a complaint ... I had one parent threaten legal action – shouting at me down the 'phone ... I said I'd investigate ... Within an hour he was on the 'phone again, demanding to know what I was doing about it. I had to talk to the school counsellor and that wasn't possible because she was teaching until recess time. I said I'd ring back after that ... Then the regional office rang to see what I was doing about Mr. [X]'s complaint. You just can't

> deal with everything instantly, but you get bullied until people get what they want. (Principal, independent school, Victoria)

> The staff took a vote of no confidence in me to the school council ... On legal advice I'd stood down a teacher accused of child sex offences – but I couldn't let that get out. They assumed I had a vendetta against the teacher ... I couldn't believe the staff would do this to me after all these years ... I thought they knew me better. I was devastated. (Principal, Catholic school, Victoria)

Staff members are likely to enlist union support against a principal, instead of dealing with a dispute in-house and face-to-face (Collinson, 1994). This form of resistance incurs principals' time through meetings, negotiations, deputations, formal documentation and procedural compliance, and even court appearances. For example, one principal said:

> It's the union who's holding us back from getting improvements for students. They're stopping curriculum reform and protecting teachers who are past their use-by date. The union gives power to people in schools who are the wrong people. (Principal, government school, South Australia)

Principals say that they can't get rid of 'bad' teachers. They believe that unions support poor performers as part of the union contract and there is little or no consequence for bad behaviour. Ironically, principals are often in the same union as the teachers but feel their school role and union membership is discounted. Hence principals believe that teachers and ancillary staff members in schools have considerable formal means of resistance available to them. These means are enhanced through their localized knowledge and cultural resources, engagement of strategic external agencies such as unions and the media, and their protected, secure employment. Underlying these formal measures are issues of power to bully, cajole or scare principals into changing their mind or pursuing a particular course of action. Principals believe that shaming and blaming are on the increase and hence have to be both proactive and responsive to these unwelcomed intrusions and obstructions to change.

Despite experiencing blows to their esteem and confidence, principals have to be adept at appearance management, hiding their true feelings to present a steady, bullet-proof persona. While staff members can express a range of emotions, principals feel constrained to act rationally, diplomatically and courteously at all times.

The effects of unpopular policy and procedure

Incessant organizational change is one of the biggest catalysts for destructive political game-playing (Phipps & Gautrey, 2005) with such behaviours becoming more commonplace and erudite (Holbeche, 2006). Principals in this study believe that feelings of job insecurity, overwork, a lack of acknowledgement or appreciation and uninspiring work practices exacerbate the problem. They perceive a reduced level of support, trust and loyalty from their employing bodies, which is also a widespread feeling amongst teachers.

External intervention is viewed as the most significant cause of teacher dissatisfaction and antagonism[4]. Rapid policy and political change has created a work culture that is stressful, fast-moving, and demanding. It is not surprising to find that principals are also feeling stressed through increasingly complex, time-consuming and demanding workloads (Starr, 2008a).

The principalship has changed irrevocably through function creep and greater centralized controls, despite notions of greater authority delivered through local school management policies (Gronn, 2003). Principals perceive that their status and power in the educational hierarchy has been reduced to that of perfunctory middle management, with their involvement in broad policy decision making curtailed and their work intensified and re-defined (Starr, 2000). The changing nature of the principalship and policy direction is seen to hinder rather than help change processes, even though governments place more emphasis on performance outcomes.

Leaders feel they "are prisoners, not masters, of time, always at someone else's beck and call" (Evans, 1996, p. 226). They feel overwhelmed with the 'administrivia' lumbered on them. Beck (1999, p. 223) calls this state of affairs "the death of educational autonomy". The neo-liberal small state exercises power and control through audits, compliance, accountability and testing regimes, by public cross-school comparisons and increasing regulation (see Smyth, 2006). Principals unanimously believe that this "tyranny of transparency" (Strathern, 2000) affects morale. Feeling controlled and surveilled adds to difficulties in leading change, and feelings of being coerced simply get people's backs up (Lawrence, 1954).

This study supports Yap and Chrispeels' (2004) research which found that systemic hindrances include principals' reduced choice and decision-making capacity due to external, intensified workloads, insufficient resources, the timing, nature, volume and disruption of externally imposed change initiatives, and union objection. The principals in this study add to this a lack of agreement amongst educators about policy or direction, widespread teacher burnout, disgruntlement and disengagement, rapidly changing school populations, and a lack of professional learning about dealing with change, resistance and organizational politics.

The result is that the great majority of principals resent their inability to curtail their working hours, are concerned about commitments to family and friends, and worried about the health impact of their jobs due to a lack of sleep, relaxation and exercise, emotional turmoil and constantly feeling overwhelmed by what they have to accomplish (see also Hamilton, 2008, and Van der Doef & Maes, 1999). A further worry is that they must tread a cautious

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[4] Change is even more compromised when principals themselves are resistors. There is little research available about leaders' resistance to change, but almost half of the principals interviewed expressed concerns or a lack of confidence or disagreement with government policy positions. This is an area for further research.

path in leading major change, having to ensure support and agreement from those who have power over their employment, while assessing reactions and challenges that emerge and deciding how to address them. Change incurs inherent professional vulnerabilities for principals (Starr, 2008c).

As principals' time has been increasingly consumed with management tasks, they feel they have less time to spend with students and teachers in classrooms (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005). They feel that teachers no longer know what principals actually do because they see less of them. One principal explained it thus:

> They don't know what they don't know. They have no idea what I do. Not even the deputies know what I do. Everyone is busy working in their own patch and doesn't see what anyone else is doing ... they assume no one is as busy as them ... it came as an absolute shock when I took on this job to find out what it was really about ... It hit me that I was responsible for everything. (Principal, government school, Victoria)

The principals supported several ideas for enhancing major change efforts (Starr, 2008b): providing clear and precise reasons for change and the benefits of it, democratic decision making, shared or distributive leadership (see Starr & Oakley, 2008), ongoing thorough communications, continual optimism and school-wide announcements and progress reports from principals themselves, reducing school calendar / extra-curricular commitments, the nurturing of key personnel who will assist in leading and managing change, being seen to be personally involved in the change, making necessary adjustments to plans as the change progresses, providing staff with time for team meetings and ongoing, relevant, school-based professional learning opportunities based on their needs, and finally, by respecting not condemning the past and upholding traditions that are considered important in the school community. People have to feel their voices are heard and acted upon (see Paton & McCalman, 2008) and periods of significant change need to come to times of stability – 'permanent white-water' is impossible to maintain (Holbeche, 2006).

Conclusion

School politics are clumsy and rarely overly organized, but they can be as lethal as any in other organization (Evans, 1996). Resistance and political game-playing occurs in every school, and are experienced by every school principal. Opposition can come from any area within or outside the school, and must be anticipated and acted upon. This is more difficult than it sounds, because resistance can be both overt and exercised in silent, non-apparent ways that make challenge more difficult. Principals ponder the causes of resistance which are often unclear, and tell cautionary tales about ignoring micro-politics and groundswells of resistance to one's peril. Principals have to engage, however, whether they like it or not, even though in the end most change efforts fail to meet implementation objectives (Kotter, 2006).

School leaders require political astuteness to successfully lead and manage second order change, yet micro-political issues are too often considered 'undiscussable' (Argyris, 1998) or too uncomfortable to be considered in rational managerial discourses since they reflect badly on leaders (Watson, 1982). But the sad truth is that resistance tactics are deployed

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Principals, Politics and Change
Karen Starr, Deakin University
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because they have the desired effect. They disrupt organizational goals and deflect leaders' attention. Dissenters believe the stakes of change are high, that the situation needs manipulation and oppositional players will have to be diminished.

While organizational change is a hot topic and an area of interest in education, there is very little Australian research that specifically discusses principals' experiences, reactions, thoughts and reflections about resistance to school renewal. It has been an areas of study largely elided or ignored. This study demonstrates the need for further research into the political machinations of radical school renewal and the political skills required of principals to lead and manage major change.

The findings establish that the process of major change is as important as the content of the change. Change cannot be left to chance or goodwill. Knowledge about what to do is as important as determining what needs to be done (Buchanan & Badman, 2008).

Australia's Prime Minister, Mr Kevin Rudd, has threatened to close failing schools and sack their principals through his government's "education revolution" if improvements are not up to standard. Hence leading and managing change will become even more important for principals, which highlights the need for professional learning and support in this area (see also Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007).

It is astounding that Australian principals currently receive no formal professional learning about confronting politically motivated challenges to change, which is a critical component of their job. There are also implications for the selection and appointment of principals, given the skills required to manoeuvre school personnel and practice to embrace major change.

The imperative for major change in school leadership preparation, induction, professional learning and support is this: "the change agent who is not politically skilled will fail" (Buchanan & Badham, 2008, p. 18.)

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