Organization and leadership in urban schools

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March 2004

Running head: Organization and leadership

Word count: 2990

Abstract

In Canada, urban 'inner-city' schools serve predominantly immigrant, aboriginal, and other minority communities. The majority of teachers and school administrators, however, are middle class majority culture educators who come from outside the inner city area. In this article I draw upon the Canadian experience to argue that the argument that the structure and delivery of inner-city education involves issues of school organization and leadership that are substantively different from those encountered in the suburban milieu with which these educators are more personally familiar.

Organization and leadership in urban schools

In Canada, most teachers and administrators are white middle class Anglophones who come from outside the inner city area and are originally from suburban or small town environments (Lockhart, 1991). They were good students, and they did well on their examinations. They then went to University, where again they did well. After completing their first degree, they were accepted into the Bachelor of Education program to become teachers. So, six years after leaving high school, they are now qualified to return to the school as a teacher.

The process of becoming a teacher, therefore, is not only intellectually rigorous, it is also both long and expensive. Six years of university education are required, and many students have to borrow money from either family or the government. This restricts post-secondary opportunities for students from limited income homes who do not have access to such additional funds. As Levin (2001) observed, "family background continues to be the single most important predictor of educational and life outcomes" (p. 31). We must also consider that in order to be a teacher, students must do well on their examinations. In other words, they must be successful in the system as it exists now.

Most Canadian educators, then, are members of a socio-economic class that is quite self-sufficient and well educated. It is difficult for them to recognize the iniquities of the education system or to challenge the status quo once they are employed as teachers. As a result, the role of culture and the concerns of marginalized or minority groups are seldom addressed in the structure or daily life of schools.

The role of culture

Nonetheless, researchers and practitioners alike are starting to recognize that culture plays a major role in the formulation and exercise of educational leadership. This recognition has been some time in coming, especially in what I shall call the Triple A schools, those of the Anglo-American-Australian axis. These are schools located in "the English-speaking industrialized countries" (Levin, 2001, p. 7) of the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as those other countries that have come under the influence of these societies. Such schools have tended to look at life through Anglo-Saxon eyes, convinced that theirs is the only reality. Those who are unsuccessful in such schools, and there are many, are assumed to fail because of their own weaknesses. It is never the system that is wrong.

Educators and policy-makers are now starting to realize that the culture and context of these Triple A schools is different from, but not better than, the culture and context of other schools serving different societies (Goddard, 2001; Goddard & Foster, 2002; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996; Heck, 1997; Walker & Dimmock, 2002). This presents particular issues when the community served by the school represents a multiplicity of cultures, languages, world experiences, socio-economic status, and so forth.

Walker and Dimmock (2002) noted that "theory and policy in educational administration and leadership are more strongly contextually bound than many researchers and policy-makers in the Anglo-American world are prepared to acknowledge" (p. 2). These authors and others have observed that culture refers to more than the idiosyncratic climate of the school but rather includes the broader societal culture within which the school is located and functions. In response to this critique,

Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) developed a preliminary model of leadership and culture that recognized the effect of the majority or dominant societal culture on leadership processes within the institutional structure and culture of the school. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Goddard, 2002), this model assumed that the culture of the school was representative of the societal culture and that the norms and expectations for education, as held by various constituent groups, were similar. There are serious implications to the model in situations where the local cultural milieu is different from that of the dominant society.

Education in Inner City Schools

Such situations exist in urban 'inner-city' schools serving predominantly immigrant, aboriginal, and other minority communities. The organization and delivery of education in the inner city involves issues of school organization, leadership, teaching, and culture that are substantively different from those encountered in the suburban milieu with which these educators are more personally familiar (Gibb, 2000; Harris & Chapman, 2002; Nieto, 2003). For example, Canadian studies have found that the proportion of visible minority people in a neighbourhood had a strong negative affect on neighbourhood poverty levels. Even when controlling for socioeconomic factors, Kohm (2002) found that behaviour problem scores increased when children lived in less affluent neighbourhoods that had high unemployment rates and low levels of social cohesion. Higher incidences of behaviour problems in schools are, in turn, strong negative indicators of academic success (Green et al, 2001). It appears, then, that high numbers of visible minority students can be a mark of poverty in the neighbourhood served by the school. High levels of poverty can lead to behaviour problems that, in turn, result in low

academic achievement. Administrators and teachers must recognize that these realities affect the perceptions and expectations brought to bear on the school's institutional culture and structure, and on their interactions within that structure and culture.

In Canada the problems of education and learning in urban schools are urgent. American studies (e.g., Wang, 1996) indicate that there is a substantial knowledge base that can be used to improve the capacity for education in urban communities. Such a knowledge base, unfortunately, is rarely accessed in mainstream schools. Indeed, Lee (1986) reported that the high dropout rates for native students in Saskatchewan urban centers suggested that an inner-city native alternative school may be the best way to return students to some form of education.

We know that student expectations are different in the inner city. Andres and Looker (2001) used data from two longitudinal surveys of Canadian youth, one conducted in British Columbia and the other in Nova Scotia, to examine the effects of rural versus urban/rural and metropolitan residence on young people's educational expectations and attainments. Their findings showed that students in rural areas had lower expectations and attainments compared to other students, even when parental background, gender, and academic stream were controlled. It is instructive that such similarities exist at each end of a large country, in jurisdictions with two quite different educational governance structures and demographic profiles.

We also know that educator expectations are different in the urban environment. Johnson (1997) surveyed 21 principals and 7 assistant principals in a large Canadian city to examine their perceptions of the effectiveness of programs for at-risk students. In general, these administrators endorsed the effectiveness of community approaches to

assisting at-risk students, and felt that the focus of interventions needed to be broadened beyond the merely academic. In their national review of educational poverty programs in Canada, Maynes and Foster (2000) emphasized the increasing diversity of the student population, the importance of temporary and large-scale funding, and the relative lack of program evaluation for such programs.

If student and teacher expectations about education are different in urban settings than they are in the mainstream, what are the implications for teacher education?

Implications for Teacher Education

In Canada, there is a small but growing movement towards education as a force for social and moral development. Although often cloaked in the rhetoric of the post-modern, this focus is in fact a call for a return to schools as community enterprises. Norquay (1999) explored questions of racial identity and social difference, and challenged the concept that the teacher might be considered a neutral change agent in relation to whiteness and white privilege. Barakett (1986) described how teachers formulate assumption about student behaviour based on past experience, and tend to group heterogeneous student populations less on ability than on practical organizational interests.

Adopting a model that is grounded in critical theory, Hesch (1999) argued for a social reconstructionist approach to produce a culturally relevant teacher education program. Such an approach would require instructors to acknowledge the social and educational contexts in which they work while working for the long-term interests of their students. In addition to this focus on social class and economic class, "differences … of ethnicity,

language, and religion have become vital policy issues" (Levin, 2001, p. 14) that are

deeply embedded in the design and delivery of teacher education programs.

A model of school change

In a forthcoming article (Goddard & Bohac Clark, submitted) a colleague and I have

developed a two-cycle model of school change. The first cycle reflects change grounded

in the school itself, whereas the second cycle permits change to develop a greater societal

impact. The model draws upon the work of Bohac Clark (2002), Goddard (2001),

Hallinger and Leithwood (1996), Walker and Dimmock (2002), and Wilber (2000). In

our integrated model of school change the various elements are shown to follow a four-

stage cycle. This synthesis is presented in quadrant form (see Figure 1).

[insert Figure 1 about here]

In stage 1, *individual mobilization*, students and teachers develop their personal views

of the school and their own place in it. As they begin to challenge their taken-for-granted

beliefs (Nieto, 2003) about each other and about themselves, teacher responses can

include higher expectations of student success. The development of more variety in the

assessment models utilized by the teacher and of culturally and linguistically responsive

curriculum (Abdal-Haqq, 1994; Goddard, 2002) can lead to student self-actualization and

to recognition of racism, bias, and other stereotypical behaviours.

In stage 2, *community building*, the school culture evolves to enhance community

perceptions of school performance and include the meaningful participation of parents

(Salisbury & McGregor, 2002). Here principals are catalysts, willing to take a moral

stand on their beliefs and bringing teachers together in collaborative approaches to

student learning. Staff and students adopt the school culture in a deeply personal way and

the differential effects of race, ethnicity, low income, gender (Ryan, 1998; Thomas et al, 1997) are recognized and accounted for in the school. As Bingler (2000) suggests, the school becomes the center of a healthy community.

In stage 3, *creating an enabling environment*, the school begins to focus on outcomes such as provincial assessments and school rankings, and on external perceptions of these measures. Schools are being judged, in part, on their ability to improve achievement among all groups of students (Haycock & Jerald, 2002). The test results are used to support the development of policy and procedures (Lindsay, Halfacre & Welch, 2001), resulting in evidence-driven or evidence-supported decision-making. When they base their decisions on data instead of on preconceptions, teachers begin to move beyond viewing student abilities through the lens of a deficit model. As a result of their individual growth during the first two stages, teachers recognize that performance on standardized tests is only one part of the story of student development, and the school ensures that a wholistic picture of the child is (re)presented to the external community.

In stage 4 the schools evolves *an unfettered focus on student learning*. Here there is on-demand psychological and ability testing, and individual needs are met through the development and delivery of individual program plans (IPP). Resources are directed to ensure the success of the IPPs, and schools actively intervene in students' lives. Initiatives such as breakfast programs and student support groups are established, and parental involvement and awareness of the school programs are increased. Schedules are constructed that do not further marginalize those children who have limited English proficiency, but rather provide support and resources to permit effective teaching and successful learning to take place (Goddard & Foster, in press).

In our article (Goddard & Bohac Clark, submitted) we argue that educational change is not a static process, where a school might achieve a certain level of effectiveness and then become organizationally complacent. Rather, development occurs in a spiral progression. We suggest that institutional change occurs in a cycle, with the school moving through the four quadrants in sequence, and further that schools move though at least two cycles of development, with each cycle taking approximately two years to complete. Over a four year period the school tends to move through two full cycles, intensifying the change at each turn. However, this is a closed loop existence, and the growth of a school is often interrupted by staff or administrator turnover. In Canada there is a common practice of principal rotation happening at five year (or two-cycle) intervals. Such rotations are predicated on the professional craft knowledge that continued school growth requires regular injections of new leadership.

I would suggest that allowing schools to continue to evolve requires them to move from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2. Here the school has a bigger goal, that of effecting societal change (see Figure 2).

[insert Figure 2 about here]

Cycle 2 also consists of four stages, through which the school progresses. In the first of these, which is stage 5 on the overall model, the individual engages in active self-reflection and value awareness. Through such *individual self-knowledge*, students are encouraged to consider their place in the world at large, beyond that of the confines of their school of community.

In stage 6, the focus of knowledge moves from the individual to one of *community responsibility*. Here the students are encouraged and assisted to develop an activist

agenda, one that permits them to engage not only with their immediate communities but also with those from the wider national and international context.

In stage 7, the work of social change becomes embedded in the daily life of the school. Not only the work of a few dedicated teachers and students, the accomplishment of wider societal goals is now perceived to be a *raison d'être* of the school itself. Such *purposeful facilitation of social change* becomes part of the philosophical underpinnings of the school organization, with resources and staffing being directed towards this goal.

In the final stage, the organizational focus of stage 7 becomes part of the individual focus of each student. This results in *student action for social change*, with teachers stepping back to permit students to enact individual responses to issues of social justice and equity. Each individual is both visible and visibly responsible to the development of a caring community.

Conclusion

I would suggest that one of the reasons for the failure of many recent educational reform initiatives has been that a lot of these are attempting to engage cycle 2 change without first achieving cycle 1 completion (see Figure 3). The administrators, staff, students and parent members of the school community are therefore unprepared for the challenges inherent in taking a social transformative stance. It would appear that, to get to cycle 2, schools need to have strength and willingness to address politically sensitive issues. If they have not first developed an understanding of their role as a place for student learning (stage 4), then they are unable to move through self-knowledge to community responsibility and individual action (stage 8).

[insert Figure 3 about here]

One of the reasons for the failure to make this transition is the received folk-wisdom, in Triple A schools, that education should not be political and that educators should not take a stand. This perception holds even though we know that schooling is in essence a moral enterprise. I would argue that when Cycle 1 has been completed, and the basic needs of the school have been met, then there will develop a willingness and desire to tackle politically sensitive issues. However, it is difficult to move to stage 2 due to the high levels of transiency among teachers and administrators, who as a result are always dealing with stage 1 issues.

Ultimately teachers burn out working with stage 1 people all the time, so in terms of what they do for the community they are fated never to get to stage 2 themselves. Those who do not burn out, or who get a chance to become leaders before they burn out, tend to expand their perspective to stage 2. At this point there exists a professional vision which, unfortunately, is often only realized after a transfer to another school. It would appear that schools need to have a critical mass of people who think beyond themselves, and that the development of such a cohort will require determined planning on the part of school and system level administrators.

This integrated model might help us to explain why teacher happiness with school reforms did not necessarily lead to improved school outcomes, although these might happen over time. If we accept the notion of a school life-cycle with 8 stages, each assuming different levels of importance at different places in the school life cycle, then we can better interrogate our understanding of the perceptions of school effectiveness. School effectiveness, when seen from each of the quadrants in the two stages, can present entirely different and often conflicting perceptions of the same school.

I would therefore disagree with those school reform researchers of the earlier 1990s who dismissed school improvement efforts that increased school morale but did not appear to have an immediate impact on student achievement. An understanding of school life cycles would lead me to accept that, in a struggling school, increasing morale may initially be more important than raising student achievement scores. Similarly, a school cannot simply move towards social transformation without first grounding itself in the academic imperative of student learning success.

In conclusion, I would like to pose three questions that require further research. First, if we know and accept these stages of school change, how does that alter our view of school effectiveness? Second, can we identify the reasons why schools so rarely move into Cycle 2 change? Third, can high needs schools in urban environments ever get to Cycle 2, or are they doomed to remain as places where high levels of administrator and teacher turnover results in a never-ending "spinning of the wheels" in the early stages of Cycle 1?

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Figure 1. An integrated model of school change – cycle 1.

[from Goddard & Bohac Clark, submitted: used with permission]

Stage 1: Individual mobilization

Interior individual (Wilber, 2000)
Values, religion, beliefs (Wilber, 2000)
Teaching & Learning (Walker &
Dimmock, 2002)
Principal beliefs and experiences
(Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996)

Stage 4: Unfettered focus on student
learning

Exterior individual (Wilber, 2000)
Curriculum (Hallinger & Leithwood,
1996)

Stage 2: Community building

Interior collective (Wilber, 2000)
Leadership, management, decision
making (Walker & Dimmock, 2002)
Principal leadership (Hallinger &
Leithwood, 1996)
Differences in local and societal culture
(Goddard, 2001)

Stage 3: Creating an enabling
environment

Exterior collective (Wilber, 2000)
Organizational structures (Walker &
Dimmock, 2002)
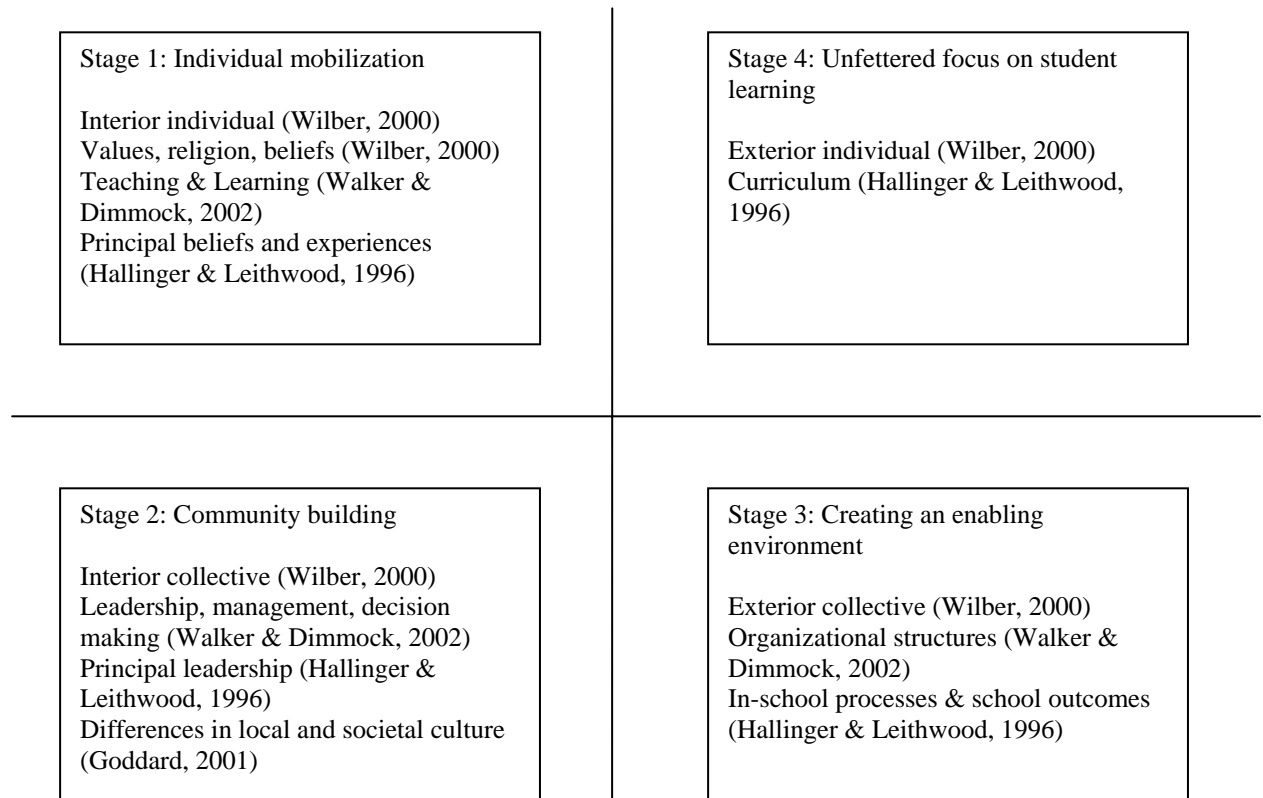In-school processes & school outcomes
(Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996)

Figure 2. An integrated model of school change – cycle 2.

[from Goddard & Bohac Clark, submitted: used with permission]

Stage 5: Individual self-knowledge

Individual active self-reflection and value awareness
Their place in the world → beyond the school
Environmental responsibility
Spirituality

Underlying question: why should I care?

Stage 8: Student action for social change

Observe behavioural changes in students
Reduction or elimination of bullying, racism, etc
Caring community
Individual is visible and visibly responsible

Underlying question: how do we make a difference?

Stage 6: Communal responsibility

How do we as a school contribute
→ social activism, volunteer work, work with the immediate communities, web connections to international communities, school-to-school partnering programs linking with schools from less affluent communities / societies
mobilising community willingness

Underlying question: why should we care?

Stage 7: Purposeful facilitation of social change

Provide enablers for school to be able to do these things
→ provide enablers for the accomplishment of these wider goals
developing & implementing policies that permit contributions to be made
policy development – resource allocation – systematic practice - embedded in daily life of the school

Underlying question: how do we care?

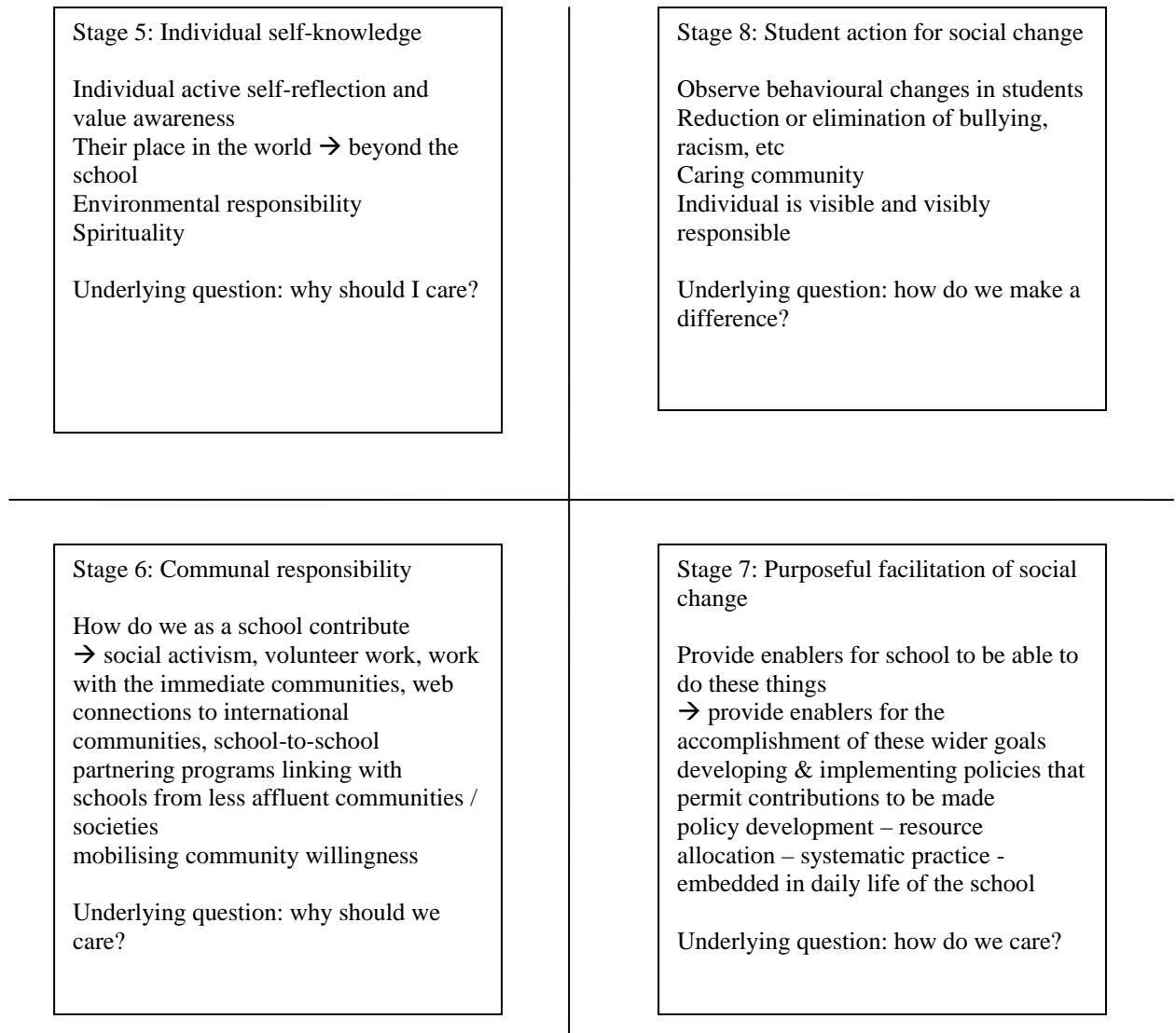*Figure 3.* An integrated model of school change.

[from Goddard & Bohac Clark, submitted: used with permission]