

# Chapter 2

## Sustaining School and Leadership Success in Two Australian Schools

Lawrie Drysdale, Helen Goode, and David Gurr

### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the Victorian research team of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) report on two longitudinal case studies of successful school principalship. In the first school, Morang South Primary School, the principal Jan Shrimpton transformed it from an under-performing school into a good school. We initially visited this school in 2004, and then again in 2008. For this chapter, we build upon an earlier published article on Jan's sustained leadership success (Drysdale et al. 2009), and articles based on our initial research with Jan (Gurr and Drysdale 2007; Gurr et al. 2005, 2006). The second school, Port Phillip Specialist School, had been led by Bella Irlicht for more than 20 years, and was transformed from a small specialist school in a converted house, into a large, world-class specialist school with outstanding facilities and programmes. We have researched and worked with Bella for many years, but for this research we initially visited Bella in 2003 (see Di Natale 2005; Drysdale 2007; Gurr et al. 2003), and then again in 2009. The chapter outlines the findings from the original investigations and describes the changes and outcomes since the initial study. It shows how the principals were able to sustain success, despite new challenges and changing contexts.

---

L. Drysdale (✉), H. Goode, and D. Gurr  
Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne,  
Parkville 3010, Australia  
e-mail: drysdale@edfac.unimelb.edu.au; helen@goodeconsulting.com.au;  
d.gurr@unimelb.edu.au

## 2.2 Background

Having conducted more than 90 case studies, the ISSPP project is now moving into a phase where the researchers are returning to many of the original case study principals to see whether success has been sustained and the factors that have led to the current level of success. The special issue of the *Journal of Educational Administration* from 2005 provides summary chapters of case studies from the seven original countries (Day 2005; Gurr et al. 2005; Hoog et al. 2005; Jacobson et al. 2005; Møller et al. 2005; Moos et al. 2007; Wong 2005) and a synthesis chapter (Leithwood 2005), whilst a special issue of the *Journal of Educational Administration* (Vol. 47, No. 6, 2009) report findings from revisiting some of the original schools.

## 2.3 Findings from the ISSPP

There have been several important reviews of successful school leadership conducted in recent years (see, for example Leithwood et al. 2006; Leithwood and Riehl 2005; Leithwood et al. 2004; Robinson 2007). Arising from these reviews, there is consensus about the core aspects of successful school leadership. In 2006, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins described four core dimensions of successful school leadership:

- Building vision and setting direction
- Understanding and developing people
- Redesigning the organization
- Managing the teaching and learning programme

During the time of these reviews, the ISSPP was collecting and reporting on case studies of successful principals, and the knowledge gained adds to this basic understanding of successful school leadership. For example, Leithwood and Day (2007, p. 189) found evidence from the ISSPP for additional principal leadership practices that include: ensuring there is a safe environment; having clearly articulated core values; constructing context-sensitive improvement plans; establishing trust; ensuring they were visible in the school; indirectly influencing the instructional programme; and working with the broader context through the building of productive coalitions.

In a recent review, building on their own research in England and findings from other research such as the ISSPP, Day et al. (2010, p. 4) describe eight dimensions of successful leadership practice. Successful leaders:

- Define their values and vision to raise expectations, set directions and build trust
- Reshape the conditions for teaching and learning
- Restructure parts of the organisation and redesign leadership roles and responsibilities
- Enrich the curriculum

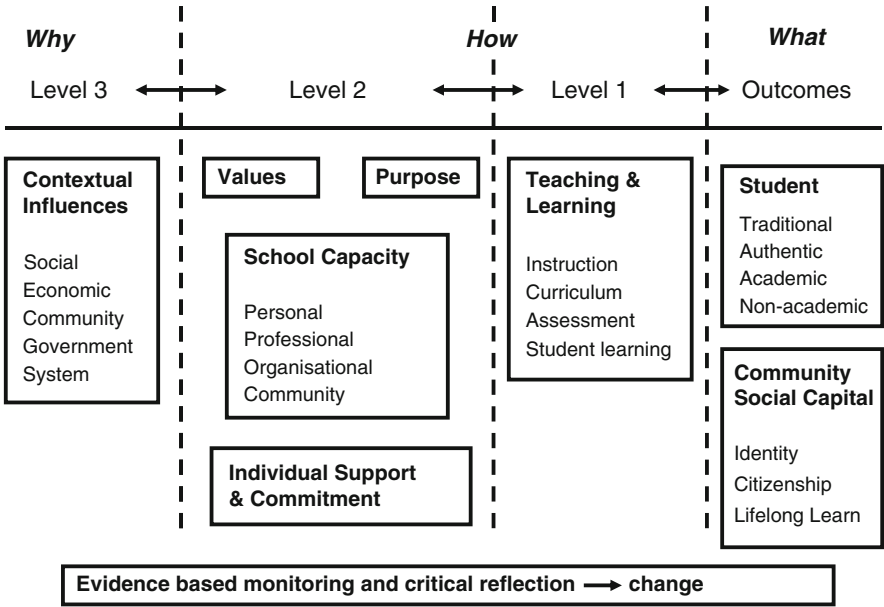


Fig. 2.1 Australian model of successful principal leadership

- Enhance teacher quality
- Enhance the quality of teaching and learning
- Build collaboration internally
- Build strong relationships outside the school community

Within the ISSPP, the Cypriot and Australian researchers have sought to explain their findings through construction of models. The Cyprus group have yet to formally publish their model. From Australia, Gurr et al. (2006) constructed a model derived from their 14 case studies (nine from Victoria and five from Tasmania), which is presented in Fig. 2.1. In this model, principals exert an influence on student outcomes (broadly conceived) through a focus on teaching and learning which is driven by their own values and vision, an agreed school vision, elements of transformational leadership, and increasing school capacity, across four dimensions (personal, professional, organisational, and community), taking into account and working within the school context, and using evidence-based monitoring, and critical reflection to lead to change and transformation.

This model provides several conceptual frameworks to allow principals to locate their work. It indicates that they can impact both directly and indirectly on student learning, but that mostly the impact is indirect. All the areas of principal leadership highlighted in this chapter are either explicitly mentioned or implied. An interesting aspect of this model is that it can be applied to those school personnel holding other leadership positions, especially those in coordinating roles. For example, there are 16 elements that describe the school capacity section, and these are relevant for

anyone who has a supervisory role – if a school leader wants to exercise leadership, an important aspect is helping to develop these capacities in those that the school leader works with.

The case studies described in this chapter take two of the original Victorian schools, considers the extent to which success has been sustained, and then, through multiple-perspective interviews and shadowing of the principals, considers the role of leadership in sustaining success. We link these findings back to our leadership model to show how principals influence school outcomes.

## 2.4 Methodology

In these case studies, three researchers were involved with the school over a 3-week period, spending approximately 10 days in the school conducting interviews, collecting appropriate documents, and observing the practice of the school principal and the life of the school. The main methods used to collect data were:

- Individual interviews with the principal (two interviews), assistant principal, curriculum coordinator, six other teachers (two previously interviewed, two long-serving at the school, one experienced teacher recently appointed to the school, one newly qualified teacher recently appointed to the school), school council president, and school council parent member
- Group interviews with parents (two groups of 5–8) and students (two groups of 5–8)
- Observation of the work of the school principal and aspects of the life of the school
- Collection of documents to confirm the success of the school and to inform the observational and interview data

Individual and group interviews used a semi-structured interview schedule focused on three broad questions:

1. Can you tell me about the changes to the school that have occurred since we were previously at the school?
2. Can you tell me about how your leadership (the principal's leadership) has developed over this time?
3. The evidence presented to us indicates that the school has remained successful. To what do you attribute this?

Observation of the principal was through shadowing the principal for 3 days. The days were selected at random. Observation of key school events (leadership team meetings, staff assemblies, whole-school assemblies, sport activities, classrooms in action, etc.) were used to verify views expressed in the interviews about the principal's leadership behaviour, and the relationships and processes and practices of the school. Events observed were chosen by the researchers in consultation with the principal and the other interviewees. Depending on the event, one or more researchers were involved and events videotaped. The researchers used field notes

and a reflective journal to record observations and responses to events. Debriefing amongst the researchers and/or with the principal occurred at the end of each observation day.

In addition to interview and observational data, relevant documents were collected such as school development plans, school prospectuses, school review reports, newsletters and examples of media coverage. These sources were used to contextualise the empirical data and to enhance trustworthiness.

## **2.5 Findings: Morang South Primary School and Jan Shrimpton**

### **2.5.1 *School Profile***

Morang South Primary School is a co-educational government primary school that was first established as a rural school in 1877. It is situated some 23 km north of the central business district of Melbourne. The school caters for children from Preparatory Year to Year six with an age range between 5 to 12 years. The school moved to a new site in 1996 to cope with anticipated enrolment increases from the rapidly developing surrounding suburbs. At the time of the initial study, the school enrolment had grown from 322 in 1999 to 583 in 2004, and there were 52 staff, including 36 teachers and various support staff.

### **2.5.2 *Principal Profile***

The Principal, Jan Shrimpton, worked in Victorian government schools for 40 years and was a principal for 17 years. She first took up the role of principal in 1990, and in 1993, successfully initiated and then merged two primary schools. She remained principal at the merged school until term three in 1998 when she was seconded as a Senior Education Officer in the Northern Regional Office of the Victorian Department of Education and Training. At the request of the Regional Director, she took up an acting principal position at Morang South Primary School in term four of that year. When the position was advertised the following year, she applied, was successful, and was in the substantive position until her retirement in term two of 2008.

### **2.5.3 *Background: Previous Findings***

The initial case study was conducted in 2004. The school was identified as a turn-around school as a result of a systemic school review conducted in 2003 (each Victorian government school is currently required to undergo self-assessment and

independent verification every 4 years, and previously every 3 years; see Gurr 2007). Prior to Jan's appointment in late 1999, the school had experienced a considerable decline in performance, especially between 1995 and 1999. Evidence of the school's performance was noted in the 1997 School Triennial Review (Morang South Primary School 1997, p. 6):

The analysis of student learning at Morang South highlights that many children are working below the expected Curriculum and Standards Framework levels in English and Mathematics.

A further decline in performance between 1997 and 1998 was noted in the 2000 School Triennial Review (Morang South Primary School 2000). A major reason for the poor results was explained by the poor school culture that had developed, with this most obvious in conflict between the principal, teachers and parents. Much of the conflict was attributed to the school's move to a new site and the then principal's management style.

From the time Jan was appointed principal in late 1999, the school's performance improved on a number of measures. The 2002 Triennial Review report (Morang South Primary School 2000: 2) showed that:

It is evident that the school has made a significant recovery since 1998 and the new leadership team is well placed to tackle the curriculum issues that the school must address over the next Charter period.

During our study, we found evidence of improved student performance in Mathematics and English, staff opinion, parent opinion, resource management, school image, and principal reputation and esteem among peers and the school community. This was supported by findings in the 2003 School Review:

Morang South Primary Schools is to be congratulated on continuing its improvement over the triennium. The school provides a stimulating and dynamic curriculum that successfully caters for the needs of the school community. Improvement in all aspects of the school is commendable. (Morang South Primary School 2003: 2)

The school identified its success on a range of criteria. In addition to improved performance in literacy and numeracy, the school noted: Development of a clearly defined philosophy; collaborative, happy, committed staff; positive and rich learning environment for the children; community support; and a sound reputation in the community.

The main reason for success was reported to be the principal's positive contribution. She described her greatest achievement as having the whole community working with her. From our analysis of the data, we identified four core themes that appeared to account for her success – leadership style, personal philosophy and values, building relationships and personal characteristics. In terms of her leadership style, she was described as a positive role model, inspirational, and empathetic. Her style was consultative and conciliatory. Her personal philosophy was centred on the whole child and not just academic results.

I have had a long and enduring commitment to all children receiving the best possible range of educational experiences, opportunities to succeed, and to reaching their full potential. (Principal, 2004)

She had introduced the notion of the school moving from a ‘rules-based’ approach to a ‘values-based’ approach. Building positive relationships was a corner stone of her approach to improving teacher morale and commitment, and establishing community support. Her personal characteristics included integrity, high energy, sensitivity, enthusiasm and persistence.

There is nothing you cannot achieve and fix if you are persistent, consistent, and tenacious.  
(Principal, 2004)

### ***2.5.4 Changes Since the Last Visit***

During our return visit in 2008, we were interested to see what changes had occurred and to what extent the school was able to sustain its performance. The following changes were noted:

1. The school enrolment had declined from a high of 611 students in 2005 to 500 students in 2008. This resulted in the need to reduce staff through transfer, retirement or non-renewal of those teachers on yearly contracts (in Victorian government schools, the majority of teachers are employed on a tenured basis, but all schools will have some teachers employed on 1-year contracts to cater for permanent staff, leave, fluctuations in enrolments, curriculum needs and so forth). Changes in enrolments were largely due to the establishment of two new schools in the area designed to cope with the projected growth in population in this rapidly expanding outer fringe of Melbourne.
2. There was an older staff profile, as many of the younger teachers had moved for promotion, or their short-term contract had not been renewed because of a decline in student enrolments.
3. The student demographics had changed to the point that behavioural problems were more pronounced due to more students coming from challenging family backgrounds.
4. Major Education Department initiatives imposed on the school included implementing a new curriculum framework, new assessment and reporting practices, and greater accountability procedures. These initiatives had put increased pressure on staff and school resources.
5. At the time of the research, the principal announced her retirement after 10 years as principal; Jan retired in term 2 of 2008 and her assistant principal, Julie, was successful in gaining the principalship.

### ***2.5.5 Ability to Maintain or Improve Performance***

In 4 years since the initial research, there was sufficient evidence to indicate that the school had maintained its overall performance. The 2007 School Review report (Morang South Primary School 2007: 4) noted in the executive summary:

It is a good, successful school which aims to consistently provide high quality education and continuously improve.

The report listed successful attributes as a strong sense of purpose and community, high level of collegiality, strong leadership and quality professional learning. It congratulated the school on its initiatives to improve student outcomes and improve the quality of school life through a focus on learning, social competencies, student leadership, citizenship, student well-being, values development and extra curricular activities.

School data across a range of areas supported this view. The School Level Report (Morang South Primary School 2007; assembled centrally from data supplied by all government schools) showed that literary results in the early years (Prep to Year 2) remained well above state benchmarks, and results for English and Mathematics in the statewide testing programme (Assessment Improvement Monitor, AIM) in Year 3 and Year 5 showed a slight upward trend with results at or above the state average. Student absence rates remained high but showed improvement, and parent opinion of key aspects of the school had improved on most items, although general satisfaction showed a slight decline. One area where results were not sustained was staff opinion as this declined in most variables but remained at very high levels; nevertheless, declining from the 90th to the 70th percentile compared to other primary schools. Two areas that teachers were concerned about were student behaviour and student motivation. However, there was data that indicated some very positive improvement with, for example, the 2008 records showing a decline in incidents with serious consequences from 481 in 2004 to 26 in 2007.

### **2.5.6 Reason for Sustainability**

The interview and observational data collected from the return visit showed that the original four themes that accounted for the principals' success were still evident – leadership style, personal characteristics, relationship building, and personal philosophy and values. The interviews and observations provided greater clarity concerning the interventions and approaches used by the Jan to improve school performance. Her focus on staff, parents and students remained central to how she worked.

### **2.5.7 Leadership Style**

Jan noted that her style had, in the main, not changed, although while she said she had not lost any of her patience, she had had to be tougher on some occasions. She described herself as not being afraid to address issues head-on, whilst remaining cognisant of the welfare of all involved.

I will be tough if I need to be but I always try for a win/win. (Principal)



She was observed to be influential and purposeful. Her style was open and invitational rather than confrontational. As one experienced teacher remarked:

Even if you have done the wrong thing you feel like you are being congratulated.  
(Experienced Teacher)

Her approach to decision making was described as ‘collaborative’, ‘democratic’ and ‘consultative’. Key decisions were discussed in forums where issues could be openly raised by staff. Jan and her assistant principal, Julie, worked as a team. Julie had been selected to the position because she was perceived to have complementary skills. Jan was the communicator who was able to articulate the vision and build relationships. Julie was the curriculum leader whose expertise was in teaching and learning. Indeed, the revisit confirmed that the success of the school relied on both Jan and Julie, and, increasingly, on teachers contributing through leadership teams.

Jan had developed a structure that promoted professional learning teams at each level, and she had empowered the teams to set their own goals and try new approaches.

We don’t interfere with staff once they run with an idea. (Principal)

Teachers were encouraged to be leaders at every level and both individuals and teams were expected to be accountable for their performance. Interestingly, while she empowered staff she was also a ‘hands on’ leader. She frequently visited classrooms and provided support where possible. This type of support was described by the Languages Other Than English (LOTE) teacher who had recently requested a return to the classroom:

Last year to make the transition a smooth one she gave me planning time with the Year 5/6 team, provided me with opportunities to attend professional development, a general ‘Hi how are you going?’, and coming into my classroom to see how I am going, and giving me confidence to do a better job. The whole Year 5/6 team has been supportive.

### 2.5.8 *Personal Characteristics*

Jan displayed a range of personal characteristics. A key characteristic was a strong sense of purpose and persistence. She outlined that it had taken her 5 years to turn the school around and that it was important not to let go of the momentum. She spoke about how it was being alert to events and stepping in before events escalated:

*I try to avoid going into damage control (Principal).*

Jan had a positive self-image: *I see myself as a successful leader (Principal).*

Her success was based on teacher and community support, and the trust of the children. She was able to bring the community together and maintain the momentum for improvement. Her positive view was regarded by teachers as a role model to others that helped create confidence and a positive school climate. She also had numerous personal qualities that were admired and respected by staff. She was described as friendly and upbeat, creating good vibes, very loud and very funny,

compassionate yet tough also. She was vigilant, and self-contained as a person, yet very open and a good listener. As one teacher said:

With Jan you can walk into her office and say anything that is on your mind-personal or work.

Finally, she was regarded as an excellent communicator, totally trustworthy, diplomatic, and supportive.

### ***2.5.9 Personal Educational Philosophy***

Over the 10 years of her principalship at the school, Jan's educational philosophy remained the same. She felt it was important to work holistically. For example, while literacy and numeracy were important, so were the Arts, social competency, and tolerance of others. Her aim was to bring together the resources to create a community of life-long learners, rather than striving to be the top school in the state.

The Educational Department focuses too much on literacy and numeracy, yet we know we do well by our students who do well at secondary school. (Principal)

The Year 6 teacher reflected that Jan saw her work as a vocation rather than a career:

She works well and gets something positive out of even the most difficult student, parent or situation.

Another teacher outlined the philosophy by commenting that the school did not have the best student outcomes data, but the kids were motivated and happy, and parents saw the school as successful and a happy place. Jan strongly believed that schools were for students, and this was demonstrated by her recruitment philosophy:

We recruit for attitude. First of all they must be passionate about teaching, love kids, and want to be part of a team. Then skills come second. (Principal)

### ***2.5.10 Relationship Building***

Jan was able to build relationships with a wide range of individuals and groups. She had demonstrated her capacity to do this when she turned the school environment around from one that was caustic with everyone fighting, to a harmonious and friendly atmosphere. She was able to reach out to the community and establish trust and confidence in the school. She talked about building community through the use of open door policies, lots of meetings with parents, encouraging teachers to invite parents in the classroom, providing parenting programmes, and acknowledging parents' good work.

She was able to effectively manage staff. For example, if she had to remove a teacher from the school, she tried to ensure that both the school and the teacher were both satisfied. Relief teachers provided feedback that they saw Jan as very welcoming and they preferred to teach in this school more than any other school. She developed and empowered young teachers, and provided them with quality professional learning and leadership opportunities. Jan was very supportive of her staff and gave an example of a direct intervention with a staff member:

A young, excellent teacher wanted to be friends with the student, but seemed to be heading for disaster...I sat down with her and was very directive about what she had to do...in her second year I set her up in a team teaching situation...she is now one of our best teachers.

Above all she established trust as her assistant principal describes:

When I was acting principal last term I felt comfortable in the role and Jan trusted me to do this. (Assistant Principal)

She was approachable - students, teachers, and parents felt they were welcomed to speak to her any time.

### **2.5.11 Interventions**

As a leader, Jan introduced a range of interventions that impacted directly on individuals and groups, and indirectly through programmes and processes.

Key programmes that made a positive impact included programmes such as 'Quality in Schools', 'Restorative Practices', developing social competencies, and a clear code of conduct that emphasised communication rather than sanctions. The values programme was particularly effective with specific values used consistently during the school day to guide actions. One example observed was a small group of boys who had been in conflict in the school grounds and called to Jan's office. Her conversation with them began by referring to the school values. Each class had also established its own code of conduct with their own rules and consequences.

Another positive intervention was the responsibility that was given to students. For example, students staffed the front office at recess, took telephone calls and passed on messages. During one visit, one of the students came into the staffroom at lunchtime to remind Jan that she was on yard duty!

There were also interventions that were smaller scale, but nevertheless had a positive impact. For example, Jan acquired two King Charles Cavalier spaniel dogs, with Jan responsible for one, and a classroom teacher caring for the other. These were school dogs, with one living in Jan's office and the other in a teacher's classroom during the school day. These dogs had had a positive impact in a number of ways. For example, they had a calming effect on distressed or badly behaved students, particularly Jan's dog, Clipper, who sat in a basket in her office; they provided support for students who had difficulty mixing, as they were able to come to the office during breaks, put the dog on a leash and take him into the yard.

A number of extracurricular activities had been introduced. One of these was a choir. This was open to all students, regardless of whether or not they could sing. Jan trained this group each week. They performed regularly at a local old people's home.

We now move to report the findings from our second principal, Bella Irlicht and Port Phillip Specialist School.

## **2.6 Findings: Port Phillip Specialist School and Bell Irlicht**

### **2.6.1 School Profile**

Port Phillip Specialist School is a government funded multi-mode specialist school that caters for a diverse range of students with mild to severe intellectual disabilities with associated physical and emotional disabilities. The age range is from age 2.5 (Early Education Programme) to 18 years of age. It is located in the south eastern bayside area of Melbourne, 5 km from the CBD. The catchment area covers a number of suburbs in the south east.

The school started in humble circumstances in 1986 as a special developmental school located in a small converted house with 20 students. It was relocated to larger site (an old primary school that had been closed) and changed to a specialist school (permitting a wider range of students to enrol) in 1996. The school now operates from three campuses with an enrolment of 150 students and multi-disciplinary team of 50 staff (special education teachers, therapy staff, specialist teachers and teacher assistants). The school was the first 'fully serviced' school in Australia with an integrated service model to structure educational, medical, paramedical and mental health services and maximise the available resources and outcomes for students and the broader community. The school receives enrolment enquiries both nationally and internationally.

The school is highly innovative in its approach with three distinct features: A fully serviced school (with a broad range of educational, welfare, and medical services provided), with integrated services provision (referring to the tight integration between the various professionals to provide personalised student programmes) and a curriculum based on the visual and performing arts (Visual and Performing Arts Curriculum, VPAC).

### **2.6.2 Principal Profile**

Bella Irlicht was appointed principal of the school in 1988 and has overseen its transformation from a small school in a converted house into an outstanding facility with an innovative curriculum and world-wide reputation. Initially, Bella trained as

a primary school teacher and educational psychologist, before taking on the role of principal at Port Phillip. During her principalship, she gained several formal qualifications including a Masters in Education, and Graduate Diplomas in Educational Administration, Curriculum, and Student Welfare. She won a Churchill Scholarship in 1995 to study Fully Serviced Schools overseas, a concept that she then implemented at Port Phillip.

She has been recognised with numerous awards including an Order of Australia (OA), CEO of the Year for Not For Profit Organisations, and Fellowship of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders. These are outstanding achievements for a school principal and testify the breadth of recognition of her outstanding work as a principal. She officially retired from Port Phillip in 2009.

### ***2.6.3 Background: Previous Findings***

The initial research for the ISSPP was conducted between 2002 and 2003 (see Di Natale 2005). The school was identified as being a successful school from the time of its transformation into a specialist school in 1996. It had made significant achievements in a short period of time: The renovation and refurbishment of the school, establishment of a ‘state-of-the-art’ technology centre, new improved grounds and equipment, building of indoor therapeutic swimming pool and an outstanding transition programme for students leaving school. While difficult to measure in normative ways because of the particular learning difficulties of students, student achievement was recognised as improving (Port Phillip Specialist School 2002). Enrolments had increased significantly and the reputation of the school had grown in the community.

Most of these achievements were attributed the principal. She was acknowledged for gaining grants and sponsorship, establishing partnerships with commerce and industry, providing leading edge professional development for staff, and changing processes and structures to accommodate the school’s growth. She also forged strong links with tertiary institutions, and key personalities and organisations in the entertainment industry. Two key achievements stood out that attributed to her vision and drive: the development of a fully serviced school model, and introduction of an integrated model of service delivery. The fully serviced school model was a holistic approach to service provision that provided educational, medical, paramedical, and mental health services for students and the wider community. The integrated model of service delivery was an approach which saw teachers, specialists, and therapists collaborate to deliver the best instruction strategies for students.

Four aspects of her overall leadership were identified in the initial research: Personality and leadership style; Personal philosophy; Personal and interpersonal skills; and, The type of interventions that she introduced to improve student outcomes and build staff, school and community capacity (e.g. new school site, transition programme, therapeutic swimming programme, dental service, ICT support for students).

### ***2.6.4 Changes Since the Last Visit***

On our return visit we noted the key external forces for change and the internal changes:

1. The school had increased its enrolment from 120 to 150. This had placed considerable pressure to accommodate the growing number of students to extent that the school was forced to put a ceiling on enrolments.
2. Demographic changes had occurred. There was now a more diverse range of students from a broad spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds. There was an increase in the number of students with multiple disabilities, as well as an increase in students diagnosed with autism.
3. There had been a significant change in staff profile. Although there were some staff who had been at the school for a long time, there was also a significant number of new and younger staff members.
4. Similar to Morang South Primary School, major Education Department initiatives had been imposed on the school including implementing a new curriculum framework, new assessment and reporting practices, and greater accountability procedures. These had put increased pressure on staff and school resources at a time of major school change.
5. The school had been restructured. The leadership team had been restructured. Therapists, special education teachers, and assistant teachers were expected to work together and provide a new level of integrated education.
6. The school had changed direction:
  - (a) The school had been developing a new culture where the expectations were to shift from a culture of 'care' and 'therapy' to one that focussed on 'education'.
  - (b) The school had developed and introduced a new innovative curriculum based on the performing arts.
  - (c) The school had introduced a new reporting system that included pictorial representation of the students' progress.
  - (d) Staff had been more professionally accountable.

### ***2.6.5 Ability to Maintain or Improve Performance***

In the 5 years since the initial research, it was apparent that the school had moved in a new direction and staff had experienced significant change. Not surprisingly this was reflected in the staff opinion survey which had declining results (Port Phillip Specialist School 2007). This challenging environment for staff was not reflected in the parent views, as parent opinion continued to improve and far exceeded state benchmarks. This suggests that parents were supportive of the changes they were seeing. While student outcomes were difficult to measure on standard tests, teacher

judgements showed good to very good progress in all subject areas, and exceeded state benchmarks for students in special school settings. The new reporting system appeared to effectively capture individual student progress:

I get a much better understanding of my son's progress at Port Phillip than I do from my daughter's reports from her mainstream school. (School Council President)

The school's reputation was further enhanced with greater recognition from overseas as well as within the community. For example, the school initiated and hosted an international symposium on arts-based curriculum, which attracted international recognition, and created international interest in the school's arts-based curriculum, the VPAC:

VPAC has put us on the world map. She (Bella) put us out there and people wanted to come on board...In ten years we have gone from nothing to a state-of-the-art school. (Assistant Principal Operations)

From the interviews, it seems that the new curriculum improved student engagement and learning outcomes, and the new reporting process provided a broader and more in-depth view of student achievement attuned to the new VPAC.

### **2.6.6 *Reasons for Sustainability***

Again the consensus of opinion for why the school improved was attributed to the leadership of Bella. The key aspects of her principalship were, vision and direction, leadership style, personal qualities, skill set, strategic interventions, and having a positive attitude to change.

### **2.6.7 *Vision and Direction***

A key aspect of Bella's leadership was the ability to develop and articulate a clear vision and to gain broad support for this:

You have to be clear and know where you are going; you have got to know what you want, and you have got to set your direction in your own mind, and as long as you do that things will follow... you have got to have some direction and know the path that you are on so that you can take everyone else with you. (Principal)

You can't fault her vision and her leadership. (Assistant Principal Curriculum)

She never lost sight of her vision. Her overall vision had remained constant since the day one of her principalship. The message was clear and consistent, and backed up by a moral purpose as she describes:

I wanted to create the best special school in the world; to create opportunities for my students that were not available anywhere else, and to put up a model so that children do not fall through the cracks. (Principal)

Then, she was able to turn the vision into a reality by aligning staff, parents, community and other stakeholders who helped provide the necessary resources, facilities and programmes.

I am able to find resources, I am able to develop a vision, and then drive it relentlessly.  
(Principal)

### **2.6.8 Leadership Style**

When we returned to the school in 2008–2009, she still had high expectations and the drive to develop the best specialist school that had always characterised her leadership, but she had now become more of a situational leader.

There were many labels that were attributed to her leadership by those we interviewed: politician, educational entrepreneur, marketer, networker, coalition builder, and innovator. While these continued to be important, it was her high expectations that defined her leadership approach. In this area, she was uncompromising and this was recognised by staff and parents as providing a positive influence on outcomes:

She surrounds herself with people and skills, she pushes people really hard: a lot of delegation. ‘I know you can do it’, so people achieve and get on a high. (Teacher 2)

She has set an incredible benchmark for special education ... these children don’t need mediocrity. (Social Welfare coordinator)

Bella looks at the practice in the school and asks ‘How can we make this better?’ Assistant Principal Curriculum)

One parent commented that her high expectations also had a hard edge to it:

The staff are fantastic, but if they don’t work out they are gone. (Parent)

This was re-enforced by a senior staff member:

Her leadership is consistent- they know they will not get it easy. (Social-Welfare Coordinator)

While her expectations had remained high, she had become more of a situational leader in that she had developed both the ‘hard’ or and ‘soft’ sides of leadership. In terms of the ‘hard’ approach she was able to be more challenging.

I have found myself, I have grown in my own confidence, I know what I want. I used to avoid the hard stuff. I will now challenge people. I sit people down, I tell them it is not appropriate and ask people ‘What have you got to say?’

In terms of the ‘soft’ approach, she was more collaborative and actioned her expectations more appropriately. She had learnt to read situations better and to modify her leadership to suit the situation. For example, she was more capable of being consultative and invitational, and to distribute leadership responsibilities. As one teacher who had been with Bella for 17 years, said:

She has become better at allowing others to lead; she has become more distributive. (Teacher 1)



The Assistant Principal explained:

What has changed is her ability to deal with people. She is more able to say things without being judgemental, she has learnt to self reflect, and to observe others, and how they do things...

but

What has not changed is her passion and authenticity.

In summing up her leadership and ability to sustain success, the President of the School Council noted:

She is uncompromising, she is prepared to have uncomfortable conversations, she sets high expectations and empowers people, she delegates and holds people accountable and she has great energy. (President School Council)

### **2.6.9 Personal Qualities**

Bella's personal qualities and values were highlighted by interviewees as an underlying basis for her successful leadership. It was not just what she did and how she did it, but who she was. The characteristics of passion, persistence and determination were consistently highlighted:

I am passionate about what I do and I believe in what I do and want above all for it to work... if someone says 'no, there is another door'... if I believe it can be done I will move heaven and earth for it to be done and keep knocking on doors. (Principal)

Her tenacity was reinforced by comments such as:

She gets the bone between her teeth and off she goes... Working for anyone else would seem very mundane. (Social-Welfare Coordinator)

Once she gets something in her mind she is unstoppable. (Assistant Principal Operations)

Bella had a strong believe in self and self-efficacy.

Yes I did take risks, Big risks. I am a big risk taker, but I thought we could do it. (Principal)

She was also very aware of both her strengths and weaknesses. She noted her strengths as being able to seek out new opportunities, find appropriate resources, develop a clear vision, and drive through change. She also understood some of her limitations, such as in curriculum development, and sort to ensure that there were people in the school that had strengths in these areas. For example, in a leadership meeting, she was observed to say to the Assistant Principal Curriculum:

I will drive home physical resources, you drive the curriculum. (Principal)

### **2.6.10 Skill Set**

Bella had a range of important skills that enabled her to raise funds, get people interested in the school, to market the school, and to attract the right people and resources. She was skilled at public relations and in previous research, we noted her strength in

market-centred leadership (Drysdale 2002). She was a good listener, and her inquisitive nature meant she was always seeking new ideas and new ways of doing things.

She has a rare skill set. She builds, influences, and get people to do things that are mutually beneficial. (President School Council)

Her skills in attracting resources, getting people on board, finding ways to combat new challenges, networking, and forming alliances complemented her leadership style. This was supported by a range of comments:

Bella's expertise is in attracting people and funds. (Assistant Principal Operations)

Her vision, her fund raising ability, her ability to get people interested in and out of the school, her PR skills could not be better. She puts a noose around their neck until they say, 'Yes'. (Teacher 1)

She is clever at choosing staff, she knows how to read people, how to pick people with particular skills, and she always has her ears to the ground. (Administration)

The ability to listen... let them have their say...skills you have to work on... the harder stuff. (Assistant Principal Operations)

A particular skill was selecting the right people. As she was never threatened by competent people, Bella made sure that she was surrounded by people who were good at their work and had expertise that complemented her skill set.

Success is having smart people around you. (Principal)

She makes sure she has the right persons around her. (Parent)

Sustainability is very dependent on the right people – you employ people who share an empathy, frame everything with professional dialogue. (Principal)

She had the ability to get people on board and committed:

It was more about making people excited. Making them feel it was their idea and picking the key people who were most influential with staff and making sure they were on board first. If you knew they were on board you knew that other people would come. (Principal)

All this change would not be possible if it were not for a number of very solid people who backed every move I made...it is not a one man show... its about bringing people on board really. Making people own the project rather than me. Getting people to own it and facilitating the resources and trusting in people that they can do it, not standing over them. (Principal)

### **2.6.11 Strategic Interventions**

Bella had an enormous capacity for introducing significant change. In her early years as principal, she branded the school as innovative, establishing best practice, and being different (Fully Serviced School, Integrated service delivery, state-of-the-art facilities and technology resources, transition programme). In the 5 years since we first visited the school, she had continued to provide the resources, facilities, and services for students, but also continued to improve by setting the school in a new direction by changing the culture from a medical to an educational view, and developing and implementing an innovative curriculum (the VAPC).

The development of the VAPC was a massive change that required long-term commitment, dedication, and willingness to re-shape the curriculum and pedagogy. She assembled a team of external consultants and experts to work with the staff to develop a new curriculum that had not been tried before, but with the firm belief that it would greatly change and enhance the learning opportunities of students. The fact that she and her team pulled this off in 3 years, and achieved international recognition for this work, was an amazing result.

It was a massive change because it effected the way teachers were doing their teaching... everything had to be taught through drama, art music, visual arts and it had a huge impact of teaching and learning right through... All this change would not be possible if it were not for a number of very solid people who backed every move I made. (Principal)

The second major intervention was to change the school culture from what was described as a 'medical' model to an 'educational' model. Bella and her team believed that the school had focused too much on 'caring' and providing 'therapy' for students with disabilities, and not enough on education. The challenge was to move from a hospital to a school model.

We are a school number one, not a hospital. Occupational therapists must fit into a school model... As a school it is a luxury for a school to have you guys and we appreciate it...but we are a collaborative team and goals have to be mixed into the educational model – Now go to the party and tell me when the food is on. (Principal in interview with Occupational therapist)

The challenge to change the culture and to integrate all the services, and mesh the medical and therapeutic practices into an educational model was a work in progress at the time of our investigation.

### **2.6.12 *Attitude to Change***

Bella demonstrated a positive, proactive attitude to change. Her attitude was expressed as:

Change is inevitable but growth is optional, Change is going to happen anyway and you can choose to grow with it, or shrivel up and stay as you are. (Principal)

Rob(AP) and Bella allow change to happen; it never goes back to what it was; we always move forward and it is always for the benefit of the kids. (Administration)

An important characteristic that underpinned her leadership and the notion of continuous improvement was her attitude to change. She continuously moved the targets for improvement, and while she created discomfort she also produced excitement. However, at no stage did she consider there was too much change. When asked about whether there was too much change she replied:

Too much change? It did not feel as if there was too much change, it felt like it was on a course... we keep on travelling on a path, the mission was clear, vision was clear, and we just had to reach our destination. (Principal)

Her determination to be the best, her positive attitude to change and the need to introduce something new and innovative provided a stimulating concoction that produced a

new level of excitement, energy and ultimately improved outcomes for students. This energy is characterised in following statement from the School Council President:

Every resource, money in the bank and always something exciting and different to do; therefore keep moving the goal posts, keep expectations high and raising the benchmark, keep staff engaged, and recognise when things need to be kicked along – interactive white board –you have to demonstrate that you want one.

## **2.7 Discussion**

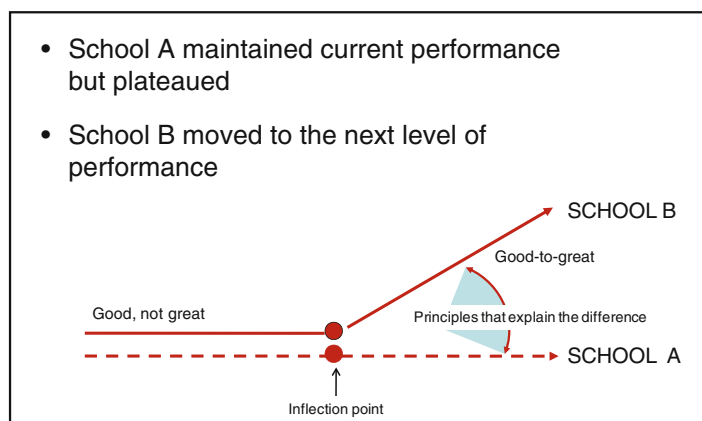
### ***2.7.1 Comparing the Two Cases***

For both schools, despite political, educational, and demographics changes over the 5 years since we first visited, these schools had maintained their improvement. At Morang South Primary School performance had plateaued. At Port Phillip Specialist School, the change agenda had accelerated and significant reforms were successfully carried out. This difference is shown diagrammatically in Fig. 2.2.

The findings show that success in both cases was largely due to the principal, and in particular, their respective leadership styles, strongly articulated personal values, personal qualities and characteristics, effective relationship building, and strategic interventions. An important variable though in why one school continued to improve, was the principals' attitude to change. At Morang South Primary School, where there was a turnaround in performance and where this successful performance was maintained, the principal was controlled by change events. As with the findings of Giles and Hargreaves (2006) and Hargreaves and Goodson (2006), system reforms, demographic changes, and the natural changes in the life cycle of the school had impacted on this school. Whilst the school was able to maintain its overall performance (which is in itself a significant achievement), it was not able to progress to a higher level of performance. At Port Phillip Specialist School, where the school continued to improve upon its history of success, the principal was able to better control the change events to the school's advantage. In both cases, internal and external change challenged past success, but the principals were able to accommodate the impact. Jan could be described as a Restorer-Builder - she turned the school around and built a good school that maintained success in the face of external and internal changes. Bella could be described as a Visionary-Driver - she drove improvement through promoting change. She used the similar external and internal changes that had led to a plateau on improvement at Morang South Primary School as an opportunity to create further improvement.

### ***2.7.2 Conceptual Model***

Both Jan and Bella's leadership is consistent with the conceptual framework of Fig. 2.1. In terms of outcomes, Jan placed equal emphasis on authentic outcomes such as social competencies, citizenship, and instilling in students a love of learning.



**Fig. 2.2** From good to great

She placed great emphasis on capacity building in areas such as professional learning, professional learning teams, acknowledging the individual talents of teachers. There was a continuous effort to engage the community and enhance the reputation of the school. She attempted to develop a distributed leadership model by encouraging professional learning teams, and she relied greatly on the curriculum knowledge and programme implementation skills of her assistant principal; Jan and Julie had complementary skills with a focus on people and curriculum respectively. Jan noted that she did not have the curriculum knowledge necessary to make interventions in the classroom: Julie was seen as the curriculum leader and expert who had the capacity to make the necessary interventions. Jan's priority was people; she was best able to build a sense of community and cohesion. Julie as the curriculum leader encouraged and developed the staff by exposing them to the latest teaching and learning methods and techniques. Jan's mantra was to raise standards, and in Julie, she had the person with the teaching and learning skills to fulfil this.

Bella's leadership also provided strategic interventions that were consistent with the model. She was able to work on all three levels. In terms of outcomes, she focused on citizenship and social competence as important student outcomes because traditional outcomes were problematic for many students (for some of the students delaying their decline in abilities is an achievement). Her most strategic and largest intervention was in Level 1 - teaching and learning. She totally changed the curriculum, refocused student assessment, and introduced a new comprehensive reporting system. The curriculum became a Visual and Performing Arts curriculum with an immediate impact on pedagogy for every teacher. At level 3 – capacity building, she continued to focus on community capacity building to forge strategic alliances to get the necessary resources and to get parent support for the changes. At the time of our study, she was attempting to change the culture from a medical to school focus. Professional capacity building continued to be a high priority with an emphasis on staff working in teams, and a school-wide pedagogical approach. She

continued to build on the individual capacity of people by encouraging them to develop new skills and self-confidence. At level 3, she renamed influential with the region and local network to harness the necessary resources and support from the Education Department and other authorities.

## 2.8 Summary

Both case studies show that leadership is important in sustaining and promoting growth and improvement. The leadership characteristics that helped the principals to develop a successful school remained important in sustaining the change. The characteristics that impacted on sustaining their performance were vision and passion, appropriate leadership style, clear and articulated values, personal qualities and skills, ability to build relationships, being highly engaged and connected to the school and community, and managing change. However, there were differences in outcomes in both schools. One school continued to maintain its current performance whilst the other progressed to a new level. Three aspects appear to explain the difference. The first explanation was that there were some different external forces that impacted on the schools that resulted in a decline in school enrolments and consequently a decrease in staffing in one school, compared with a growth in numbers that allowed for staff expansion and choice in staff selection in the other. Secondly, there was a subtle but important change in leadership style, where one principal was more prepared to challenge the behaviour of staff and create a climate of further change. Thirdly, the attitude to change appears to be crucial. One principal was proactive and created more and more change, while the other principal was more reactive to the changes in the external and internal environment and to some degree protected staff from too much change.

The final message is that school leaders matter and their continuous self-development and attitude to change are important factors in sustaining and enhancing performance.

## References

- Day, C. (2005). Sustaining success in challenging contexts: Leadership in english schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 43(6), 573–583.
- Day, C., Sammons, P., Hopkins, D., Harris, A., Leithwood, K., Gu, Q., & Brown, E. (2010). *10 strong claims about successful school leadership*. Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services.
- Di Natale, E. (2005). What are the qualities, skills and leadership styles adopted by a successful school principal in a successful Victorian specialist school? (Unpublished Master of Education thesis, University of Melbourne, Victoria).
- Drysdale, L. (2002). A study of marketing and market orientation in selected Victorian schools of the future. (Unpublished Doctor of Philosophy thesis, The University of Melbourne, Victoria).
- Drysdale, L. (2007). Making a difference. In P. Duignan & D. Gurr (Eds.), *Leading Australia's schools* (pp. 132–138). Sydney: ACEL and DEST. 2008.
- Drysdale, L., Goode, H., & Gurr, D. (2009). An Australian model of successful school leadership: Moving from success to sustainability. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 47(6), 697–708.

- Giles, C., & Hargreaves, A. (2006). The Sustainability of innovative schools as learning organizations and professional learning communities during standardized reform. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42(1), 124–156.
- Gurr, D. (2007). Diversity and progress in school accountability systems in Australia. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 6(3), 165–186.
- Gurr, D., & Drysdale, L. (2007). Models of successful principal leadership: Victorian case studies. In K. Leithwood & C. Day (Eds.), *Successful school leadership in times of change* (pp. 39–58). Toronto: Springer.
- Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., Di Natale, E., Ford, P., Hardy, R., & Swann, R. (2003). Successful school leadership in Victoria: Three case studies. *Leading and Managing*, 9(1), 18–37.
- Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., & Mulford, B. (2005). Successful principal leadership: Australian case studies. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 43(6), 539–551.
- Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., & Mulford, B. (2006). Models of successful principal leadership. *School Leadership and Management*, 26(4), 371–395.
- Hargreaves, A., & Goodson, I. (2006). Educational change over time? The sustainability and non-sustainability of three decades of secondary school change and continuity. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42(1), 3–41.
- Hoog, J., Johansson, O., & Olofsson, A. (2005). Successful principalship: The Swedish case. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 43(6), 595–606.
- Jacobson, S., Johnson, L., Giles, C., & Ylimaki, R. (2005). Successful leadership in U.S. schools: Enabling principles, enabling schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 43(6), 607–618.
- Leithwood, K. (2005). Understanding successful principal leadership: Progress on a broken front. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 43(6), 619–629.
- Leithwood, K., & Day, C. (2007). What we learned: A broad view. In K. Leithwood & C. Day (Eds.), *Successful school leadership in times of change* (pp. 189–203). Toronto: Springer.
- Leithwood, K., & Riehl, C. (2005). What we know about successful school leadership. In W. Firestone & C. Riehl (Eds.), *A new agenda: Directions for research on educational leadership* (pp. 22–47). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Leithwood, K., Seashore Louis, K. A., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. New York: The Wallace Foundation.
- Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2006). *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership*. National College of School Leadership. Nottingham: National College of School Leadership.
- Møller, J., Eggen, A., Fuglestad, O. L., Langfeldt, G., Presthus, A. M., Skrøvset, S., Stjernstrøm, E., & Vedøy, G. (2005). Successful school leadership – The Norwegian case. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 43(6), 584–594.
- Moos, L., Krejsler, J., Kofod, K. K., & Jensen, B. B. (2007). Communicative strategies among successful Danish school principals. In K. Leithwood & C. Day (Eds.), *Successful school leadership in times of change* (pp. 103–116). Toronto: Springer.
- Morang South Primary School. (1997). *Triennial school review verification report*. Victoria: Morang South Primary School Education.
- Morang South Primary School. (2000). *Triennial school review verification report*. Victoria: Morang South Primary School Education.
- Morang South Primary School. (2003). *School review report*. Victoria: Department of Education and Training, State Government of Victoria.
- Morang South Primary School. (2007). *School review report*. Victoria: School System Development Division Department of Education.
- Port Phillip Specialist School. (2002). *School review report*. Victoria: Department of Education and Training, State Government of Victoria.
- Port Phillip Specialist School. (2007). *School level report*. Victoria: Department of Education and Training, State Government of Victoria.
- Robinson, V. (2007). *School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why*, Monograph, 41. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Leaders.
- Wong, K. C. (2005). Conditions and practices of successful principalship in Shanghai. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 43(6), 552–562.

How School Principals Sustain Success over Time  
International Perspectives

Moos, L.; Johansson, O.; Day, C. (Eds.)

2011, VIII, 244 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-94-007-1334-5