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In-School Management: A Commentary on the White Paper's Proposals

Introduction

The chapter devoted to this issue in the White Paper starts with an acknowledgement of the necessity for high-quality leadership in schools if the education received by the pupils is to be effective. In particular, the essential role of the principal in this process is mentioned and, hence, the bulk of this chapter is directed towards an examination of the various proposals which aim at increasing the ability of school principals to act as agents of change and improvement. The latter part of the chapter then considers the consequent suggestions for vice-principals and post holders which are equally important if the desired transformation of our educational system is to have any chance of taking place at first and second levels.

The Role of the Principal

The White Paper states that the principal of each school is responsible for, amongst other things, determining the school's educational aims, formulating strategies to achieve these, encouraging staff support for these aims, and developing the school's curriculum policies. It is claimed that the actions and suggestions of the principal in this regard are "under the direction of the board of management" and that the principal is supported by the vice-principal and the post of responsibility holders. Here, as in many other places, the Paper draws heavily on the Report on the National Education Convention and no room is left for any doubt on the part of the reader that the influence of the principal in determining the effectiveness of the whole school and its community is decisive and crucially important. This acknowledgement is to be strongly welcomed; the recommendations which any Minister for Education wishes to make concerning the training of school principals must surely rank as amongst the most important and potentially positive suggestions which it is possible to make for our educational system. Of considerable interest here, therefore, is the emphasis placed in the Paper by this Minister on the "instructional leadership role" of the principal. Recent research on the workload of secondary school principals in Ireland has shown that they are seriously overburdened with administrative paperwork, most of which stems from the Department of Education, and which results in many cases in the almost total exclusion of the 'leading professional' aspect of the principal's job (e.g. Ní Thiarniagh, 1987; Leader and Boldt, 1994; Kerr, 1994). Even the National Education Convention Report noted this excessive load, although it drew short of allocating blame for its source (Coolahan, 1994).

There are hints within the text that major changes are being considered. For example, on page 149 reference is made to the fact that principals are expected to be familiar with all aspects of their schools, "including the work in the classroom". Is this a veiled suggestion that principals will be expected to supervise teachers and/or their teaching and classroom management practices? The question is whether they will be properly prepared for this work. Indeed, one wonders whether anyone, least of all perhaps the Department of Education, is properly prepared for the explosion that may well occur if this proposal is implemented in the form originally intended.

There is in this White Paper the first formal acknowledgement by the Minister for Education or her Department – albeit couched in coded terms – that those who are chosen to be school principals do not necessarily possess all the skills required for the efficient and effective implementation of their role simply because they were successful at interview. However, the proposals associated with this forward step are extremely cautious and leave many questions unasked, let alone answered. On page 128 (chapter 8 – “The Teaching Profession”) we find the statement “One target is that, by the end of the decade, all school principals will have participated in, and be part of, development programmes.” Page 129 gives some indication of what is meant by a “development programme”: topics to be covered would include curricular changes, dealing with students with special needs including those with learning difficulties, gender equity, generating cooperation teachers, and adult education and other specialist programmes. Of course this list is not intended to be complete; nevertheless the apparent bias in favour of administrative matters dealing with curricular programmes is a cause for serious concern. The natural place for a discussion of training for principals occurs on page 148, at the beginning of chapter 11. Instead this reads a little like the managers interviewed by Mintzberg in 1975; they described their own work as planning, organising, coordinating and controlling. Mintzberg found that, when the managers were observed at work, their actual performance could not be related to those four words (Mintzberg, 1975). The statement given in this White Paper seem at times to be as idealistic as Mintzberg’s managers and, indeed, perhaps as outdated.

Outline ideas for the training of principals are then given on page 149. These include an “introductory programme” for each new principal and the allocation of each new appointee to an experienced principal, who will act as a mentor. Details of these proposals are very sparse. We are told that the initial training will include advice on methods of staff management and school administration, but there is no indication given of either the length of the training period or the modus operandi for the mentor scheme. There is a further helpful realisation that school principals need continuous retraining throughout their careers, but the only area singled out for mention is showing principals how to give help to “underperforming and underachieving teachers”. While one recognises that a document such as this White Paper can not in any way attempt to be comprehensive in its dealings of each topic, one wonders why this is the one subject to be specified for the principals’ in-service courses. One is forced to ask who is going to run these courses. If it is to be the Department of Education then it is necessary to consider from where they will gain the expertise required to train others in currently fashionable ways of running schools. Furthermore, one must hope for a radical change in the present position, mentioned above, whereby the Department does not ask principals for any meaningful feedback on the educational running of their schools, although there are great demands on a Head’s time to complete forms giving administrative details concerning finance or pupils’ names and subject choices, etc. In fact, the research mentioned earlier has shown that the vast majority of time spent by a principal working for his or her school is spent on trivial administrative matters which could be done much more efficiently by a lower paid clerk.

It seems, therefore, that this White Paper has missed the boat on at least one central issue which is needed for the improvement of schools. Here was the chance for the Minister to state clearly that she intended the principal in each school to become the school leader, and not just an

administrative or even a managerial boss. The difference between managing and leading is colossal – only an inspired leader can really make a school into a genuine educational experience. On the other hand, this White Paper indicated that the principal will be under the direction of the board of management (and not just responsible to them) and will also be (to some extent) under the influence of both parents and teachers, and the intention is to add pupils to this list later. It seems perfectly fair that any school leader should be expected to consult widely but the true leader must also have the freedom to act in an original and incisive manner without having to check every nuance with each faction in advance. The research is suggesting, therefore, that we should be training our principals not as managers but as leaders, as is now being done in other countries.

In Sweden, for example, the head of the school is actually called “the school leader” and training, like in most countries in Europe, is compulsory. The primary aim of the training there is the change and development of the schools, not of the school leader only (Buckley, 1985). The Swedish training programme was introduced more than twenty years ago with high expectations and even higher hopes. However, some of their more ambitious targets have had to be reset in the light of experience. In particular, they now recognise that “significant development of schools takes a good deal of time – and seems to require a period of five to seven years” (Ekholm, 1979). Even given that extended length of time it is felt that there is no more than a “realistic chance” of the training having “tangible effects”. Our White Paper gives no indication at all of the length of time that would be dedicated to the training of the school principal but, in the light of the experience of the training given to teachers for the then new Junior Certificate programmes just a few years ago and considered by the Department to be sufficient, it is highly unlikely that the final proposal will be even remotely close to the lengthy timescales actually required.

Furthermore, would this training come before appointment, after appointment but before taking up the post, or after beginning working as a principal? In France, for instance, when they introduced their compulsory training for principals in 1971 (originally for just ten days but increased in 1973 to three months full-time!), they realised that a formal period of training would be inadequate and incomplete and would need to be followed by in-service training. In the Netherlands the programme covers just 13 days, but these are spread over eight months and are mainly geared towards those who are already heads or those deputy heads who have ambitions to become principals. The differences may be related to the aim of the training – France and England are concerned primarily with training individuals, whereas Sweden is mainly interested in the improvement of schools and Norway and the Netherlands attempt both (Buckley, 1985).

Many countries recognise the value of bringing together those heads who are to be trained and their trainers some long time before the course begins. This happens, for example, in Northern Ireland and Norway, but it demands the type of advanced planning that is commonplace in France. This, in turn, requires either an acceptably benevolent central control or a highly responsible devolved system that is answerable to the central authority if delays occur in choosing candidates for promotion. The extraordinary thing in this country is that the Department of Education has for so long been willing to accept without question the choices of management groups to act as principals and then pay them and act as their employers without

ever assessing either their potential or their performance. What is urgently required is a sensitive system of training for those either aiming at becoming principals or already chosen for a school. Four aspects of a head's leadership need to be developed both before and during his or her tenure. These include the curriculum, administration and finance, human relationships, and change and renewal. Unfortunately, too many of the currently available course concentrate on the first two of these, while dealing only briefly with the third and only hinting at the fourth. The new principal must be encouraged to become (or remain, in spite of the excess pressures on time!) "open and available, flexible and adaptable, and yet stable" (Buckley, 1985). Without such objectives, no training course can surely hope to fully equip principals with the skills necessary to run their schools effectively in times of rapid and sometimes unexpected change. This White Paper does specify one "policy objective" (p. 149) where, within the next five years, "each principal will have participated in a special in-career development programme related to the role and functions of the school principal." What a shame that this rare objective deals purely with numbers attending a course rather than the quality of the training offered. Unless our approach is changed we cannot hope for quality leadership appearing in our school as the norm rather than the exception.

On page 150 of the White Paper we find the proposal that "each newly appointed principal will serve a one-year probationary term" which will then become permanent upon "a positive evaluation of the principal's performance by the board of management" and a satisfactory recommendation from the regional inspectorate. Assessing the performance of another individual is never as easy as it sounds and it is to be hoped that each and every member of a board which is asked to assess its own choice for the position of principal will be given both extensive and intensive training in the methods by which they may reach their decision long before they are expected to put them into practice. The Minister also intends to appoint all new and non-teaching principals for a maximum period of seven years. One wonders if all boards of management will appreciate that circumstances within a school may change from year to year and that a principal, appointed as non-teaching, may be required to take on some teaching in later years if a timetable is to be possible; in such cases, would the term of office of the head change? Such problems, which may seem trivial at first, can become extremely difficult to resolve; one must assume that the discussions about these matters referred to in the paper will examine all the potential pitfalls.

Vice-Principals and Post Holders

The title of this section of the chapter seems to imply a fundamental change in the way in which the Department views positions of responsibility within a school. Up to now the vice-principal has been seen as a post holder; this no longer appears to be the case. The proposal is that vice-principals will be selected in a similar manner to the principal and that they will also "have access to" the same "in-career development programmes" as their principals but not, it would appear, the same training. This seems to undermine the working of the "cohesive management unit" desired by the Minister (page 151).

As before, this section relies heavily on and quotes extensively from the Report on the National Education Convention which proposed such a modification. Perhaps confirmation of this sea change is found in chapter 8, where no references at all are to be found to posts of responsibility

as part of a teacher's in-career development. Once again, unfortunately, the thorny but pressing issue of appointment to posts of responsibility has been avoided.

General Comments

This White Paper is not, of course, an academic work. It should not, therefore, be much of a surprise that citations are thin on the ground and that justifications are more often notable by their absence. Nevertheless, one gets the occasional feeling that some of the statements presented as facts have more than a little touch of wishful thinking about them. For example, "It is increasingly common practice, particularly in large schools, for other teachers [apart from the principal] to help set goals, to consider how these will be achieved and to monitor their achievement." How does the Department of Education know that this is happening at present without any interactive feedback from the schools? [Recent research has shown that less than 2% of feedback received by principals came from the Department and that virtually no educational reporting was asked of the principal by the Department (Kerr, 1994).] Is this "increasingly common practice" for 1 to 5% of schools or for 50 to 60%? The White Paper also describes the role of the principal in a large second-level school as "particularly challenging". This is in direct contrast with recent findings (Kerr, 1994) which have shown that principals of large (> 800 pupils) schools work an average of 50.3 hours per week while the heads of small (< 400 pupils) schools have a weekly average of 64.9 hours on school work. The situation is even more extreme for boarding schools, where the principals spend over 30% longer working each week than their day school counterparts. This lack of appreciation of the reality of running schools must be seen as a serious drawback to hopes of the proposals being taken positively.

In conclusion, the mood of this chapter – and of the entire White Paper – is certainly upbeat and positive, but the lack of a concrete base can sometimes undermine the reader's faith in the descriptions of the existing situation, and the lack of any reference to providing adequate financial resources for the implementation of any of these policies must be a cause of great concern. There are so many proposals listed throughout the Paper as "priorities" that it must be impossible for the Department to attempt to tackle them all evenly within a short period of time. Education is always expensive; changes in this area will be even more expensive, even if only in the short term until new structures are in place. If we want the best standards we must be prepared to pay for them – flattery of the existing workforce is nowhere near enough. Thus, at the worst this chapter might be seen as a collection of vacuous sentiments; at best it is a meritorious first attempt to make real progress. There are some excellent suggestions contained in chapter 11; one can only hope that those who may feel it necessary to resist these constructive changes will base their reasons on sound educational arguments only.

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