Using Narratives to Develop Standards for Leaders: Applying an Innovative Approach in Western Australia

Helen Wildy

Coral Pepper

Murdoch University

Abstract

*Dissatisfaction with long lists of duties as substitutes for standards led to the innovative application of narratives as an alternative approach to the generation and use of standards for school leaders. This paper describes research conducted over nearly a decade in collaboration with the state education authority in Western Australia, professional associations and several hundred individual school principals. The research established that the quality of performance of school leaders is linked to personal attributes that shape the way leaders act, rather than to actions or duties. These personal attributes (**fair, decisive, supportive, collaborative, flexible, tactful, innovative and persistent**) are interrelated in complex ways often between conflicting demands such as decisiveness and collaboration, or tactfulness and persistence. Accomplished performance is characterised, not by displaying more of an attribute, but by balancing competing demands in particular contexts. Narrative accounts of leader performance can be rated and arrayed on scales showing variation in performance of the attributes. This paper includes examples of narratives, how they are developed, their ratings, and how they are used to illustrate this variation as levels, that is, standards of performance.*

Introduction

In this paper we show how narrative accounts of leaders at work are used to elicit judgements about leaders' performance and how these judgements are used to generate standards for leaders. Furthermore, we show that there is a small number of personal attributes that, taken together, distinguish levels or standards performance. The research

spanning nearly a decade was funded by two Australian national government competitive research grants[1] in collaboration with support from the state education authority of Western Australia, principals' professional associations and unions. The outcome of the research activity is a Leadership Framework (Western Australian Department of Education and Training, 2005). Since 2003, this Framework has been adopted by the state education authority to guide professional learning programs for leaders, their performance management by line managers, and the selection of leaders for appointment and promotion.

The study is located in Western Australia, one of Australia's eight states and territories, whose population of 1.5 million is spread around the coast and southern portion of a region one-third the size of China (with its population of 1.4 billion in an area of 1 billion hectares). Historically, education is a state/territory responsibility and has traditionally been centrally administered within each of the eight Australian jurisdictions. The Western Australian state education authority is responsible for resourcing and managing 776 schools catering for 250,712 students[2] aged from 5 to 17 years. The central office is located in Perth, the state's capital, in the south-western coastal region. Responsibility for student learning outcomes rests with schools and principals are accountable for standards of performance to one of the 23 District Directors who in turn report to one of two Executive Directors located in the central metropolitan office.

For the past two decades, efforts to decentralise authority to schools and their local communities (*Better Schools*, 1987) have aimed to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and responsiveness of educational provision across a vast and sparsely populated jurisdiction. However, these efforts have competed with pressures for recentralisation. Quality assurance and accountability policies are designed to ensure high standards are maintained across the wide range of school settings, and staffing continues, as for the past hundred years, to be controlled centrally. Not only has pressure toward recentralisation emanated from the state authority; there have also been attempts by the federal government to exert increased influence in local arenas. For example, the federal government's attempts to align schooling throughout the eight education jurisdictions culminated in a proposed national curriculum. Although this national pressure was rejected, all states and territories reached agreement about the outcomes of schooling (Curriculum Corporation, 1999). As a result, each authority has undertaken extensive revision of its local curriculum and in Western Australia this led to the

development of a Curriculum Framework, accompanied by statements of intended student outcomes.

The standards-led curricular reform has been paralleled by a commitment to developing standards for leaders, particularly for school principals. This development is described in the sections of the paper following a short overview of national and international research about principals' standards.

Literature

'Standards' has been one of the dominant metaphors in educational reform for more than a decade. There are standards for student outcomes in England and Wales (National Curriculum Council, 1992), the United States (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 1991; National Research Council, 1994), Australia (Marsh, 1994) and Canada (Ontario, 1993). There are standards for beginning teachers (National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning, 1996), teachers (Queensland, Department of Education, 1997) and experienced teachers (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1989; Western Australia, Department of Education, 1997). In the context of school leaders' work, standards have been produced in many jurisdictions, for example, in Australia (Education Queensland, 1996), England and Wales (Teacher Training Agency, 1996) and the United States (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996).

More recent developments include the establishment of The National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership in Australia, in 2004, as an independent body funded by the Australian Government with the explicit purpose of advancing school leadership (Hinton, 2005). Four core functions of the Institute relate to professional standards and accreditation; professional learning and course accreditation; research and communication; and promotion of the profession. Similarly, the National College for School Leadership in the UK was established early in the 2000s. The College has three core areas of activity: leadership development; research and development; and online learning, networks and information. A Leadership Development Framework was rapidly developed for the transformation of leadership in England's schools (Bolam, 2004; Thornton, 2001).

Characteristically, the developers of standards for teachers and school leaders acknowledge the complexity of the performance domain described by the standards (Louden, 2000; Louden & Wallace, 2001).

However, standards are frequently weakened by fragmentation into long lists of duties – the tasks, roles and responsibilities of a leadership position, typically presented in a position or job description. Such long lists of duties lend themselves to checklists, with little attention to the skills and dispositions that characterise accomplished performances and even less attention to the context of the performance (Louden & Wildy, 1999b). Furthermore, a review of the assessments made against standards for leaders in one Australian jurisdiction (Chadbourne & Ingvarson, 1998) argued that the assessment of leadership qualities failed to distinguish between different levels of performance. Here we define performance as the manifestation of professional expertise[3] from which professional expertise is inferred (Chomsky, 1965).

We argue that it is not sufficient to describe levels of performance, such as those described in the standards for leaders prepared for the National College for School Leadership in the UK (Bolam, 2004). To be helpful to practitioners, standards need also to be illustrated and particularised for the range of settings in which leaders work (Jasman & Barrera, 1998; Wallace, Wildy & Louden, 1999). This paper contains examples of such application in a range of settings.

The account that follows contains the processes applied over nearly a decade to develop standards for school leaders in one Australian jurisdiction. The account describes the collection of two kinds of data: interview data which were used to create narratives; and descriptive and rating data which were then analysed using content analysis and statistical analysis. This account presents the outcome of these analyses and four key findings from the research. The final section of the paper contains a brief description of an international replication of this research, and an overview of the uses to which the research is currently being put by school leaders and the state educational authority in Western Australia.

Research Process

School leaders in the Western Australian context include principals and deputy principals of primary schools as well as principals, deputy principals and heads of subject departments of secondary schools. However, the focus of this research is the school principal. Interviews were conducted with 173 leaders, representing a range of school types and locations, and a range of gender, age and length of experience. Of these, 145 were principals. The interviews were open ended and focused

on dilemmas or tensions leaders experienced in their everyday work (Wildy, Louden, Dempster & Freakley, 2001) in a policy context of both decentralisation and recentralisation. Tensions such as *being the boss while being a member of the team, supporting staff while being honest about standards, responding to regulation while acting autonomously* are elaborated in detail elsewhere (Louden & Wildy 1999b; Wildy 1998).

The interview data were used to construct 165 narrative accounts, depicting decisions made by leaders as they dealt with dilemmas in their routine work. Each narrative is approximately 500 words, capturing sufficient contextual detail to provide credibly life-like situations while being sufficiently concise to be easily read and rated. Two of the narratives, *Like a marriage* and *The Jesus story*, appear below. The first narrative *Like a marriage* is set in a large urban area and depicts incidents that cause friction between the principals of the primary school and the co-located special education school.

> ### *Like a marriage*
>
> We are in a unique situation with two schools and two principals on the same campus. It's like a marriage: sometimes we work well together; other times we don't.
>
> Early in the year because of higher than expected enrolments an extra teacher was allocated to the other school. Students from both schools are integrated during afternoon classes so this increase in staffing brought changes to both schools. A parent-teacher meeting was organised to explain the situation to parents. Some were not happy. Their children were settled into the class and knew their teacher. They questioned how it was decided which children should move. I was standing at the back of the room. I could see the reaction of other parents so I spoke out. 'I think the principal should be congratulated.' I said. 'He had a difficult task with some tough decisions to make.' The grumblings died down. It seemed that both parents and staff saw our mutual agreement and parents became more accepting of the changes planned as they realised that the principal had spent a great deal of effort in making the decisions he had. In this situation it was really useful to have the support of each other.
>
> Last year we faced a problem when organising our combined pupil free day at the beginning of the new school year. Some of my part-time teachers were not timetabled to be at school on this day. I thought it fair to pay them to attend and I arranged for this to happen. The other principal felt that his part-time staff should attend the pupil free day but was not willing to pay them to do so. Some of his part-time staff members were not willing to attend under these circumstances, and it restricted our ability to plan with everyone involved. When the teachers at the other school learnt that I was paying my staff there was a bit of an uproar. We tried to come to some sort of agreement about a campus policy on paying part-timers for pupil free days, but were unable too. The two schools have had different policies for a few years now and we still occasionally get grumbles from staff about it.
>
> Our personalities and leadership qualities are not at all similar, but we both recognise this. We generally work through our differences but sometimes we have to agree to differ.

The second narrative *The Jesus story* was derived from an interview with a principal of a primary school set in a remote Aboriginal community, approximately 1 000km from the nearest regional centre.

The Jesus story

I want our community to know that the school is a safe place for the students and for the teachers. Students are used to seeing a lot of violent behaviour outside of the school but I want everyone to understand that it is not appropriate for aggressive acts to occur within the school grounds.

One morning just before lunch, a Year 3 student came running into my office asking me to come quick. When I got to the classroom there was an angry parent standing in the middle of the room waving an iron bar in the air in front of the teacher, yelling in language. Behind the teacher were the students, cowering at the back of the room. I said: 'Stop! We need to come outside and talk.'

I kept talking to her as I moved closer, between her and the teacher and students. As she was about to hit the desk in front of the teacher, I caught the bar and took it from her and said again: 'Talk outside.' We sat on the grass outside the room. She told me that her child was being teased. I told her that she had to talk to me about these sorts of things and she was calm for a few minutes. Then she worked herself into a rage again and stood up, took a rock and threw it at the classroom window. She was getting more and more angry, finally saying she wanted to take all her children out of the school. I agreed and called them. I asked her to leave the school grounds with the children immediately. As she went out of the gate she made threats about burning the school.

I thought the incident was over but an hour later she returned to my office to see me. I told her how disappointed I was about the incident, particularly about the damage to the school. I said that I would have to report the incident to the police. As she left again, she saw the teacher and apologised to him for threatening him in the room.

Her children appeared back in the classroom the next day. I now had time to follow up the background to the parent's claim that her child was being teased. It seemed that the child had committed a small indiscretion and had been corrected in a gentle way by the teacher. A week later when the police were in the community I gave them the report but I decided not to press charges. I called her and told her that there would be no charges laid. She was relieved.

Later in the year, she came to the teacher and asked him if she could run the Christmas concert for the end of the year. As a child, she had been educated at a mission school and spoke beautiful English. She asked if she could tell the Jesus story.

The 165 narratives were assembled in overlapping sets of five so that each set contained one narrative in common with one other set. The sets of narratives were judged by a total of 1 530 school leaders, using first mail-outs and then workshops as data collection strategies. In the first round of data collection in 1996 we wanted to find out whether the narratives could be distinguished in terms of the performances described in them. We asked participants to judge the quality of performance depicted in the five narratives, using the scale: poor, adequate, good, very good, unable to rate. We also asked participants to give a maximum of three adjectives describing the performance illustrated in the narratives. We were surprised by these adjectives: content analysis revealed the most frequently used descriptors to be: fair, decisive, collaborative, innovative, flexible, supportive, persistent, and tactful. These attributes are what school leaders considered to distinguish the quality of leaders' performance in the narratives they read (Louden & Wildy, 1999a, 1999b; Wildy & Louden, 2000).

In subsequent rounds of data collection in 1997 and 2003, we asked participants to make judgements about the performance depicted in narratives, not on the general scale 'quality of the performance' but on the eight sub scales of quality *fair, decisive, collaborative, innovative, flexible, supportive, persistent,* and *tactful.* Each narrative was rated on three of the eight attributes. Here is an example of the questions to which participants responded, in this case, for a narrative rated on the attributes decisive, fair and collaborative.

(Tick the appropriate box)

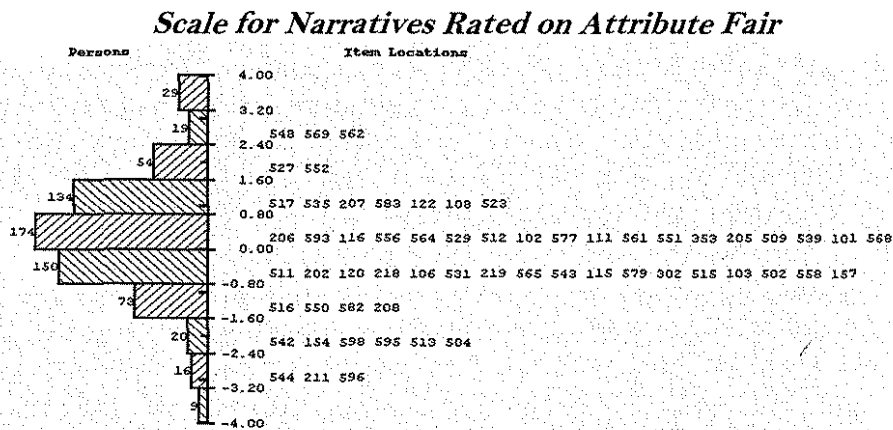1. How highly do you rate the quality of this school leader's performance in relation to *decisiveness?*

    ☐   ☐   ☐   ☐   ☐

    poor   adequate   good   very good   unable to rate

2. How highly do you rate the quality of this school leader's performance in relation to *fairness?*

    ☐   ☐   ☐   ☐   ☐

    poor   adequate   good   very good   unable to rate

3. How highly do you rate the quality of this school leader's performance in relation to *collaboration?*

    ☐   ☐   ☐   ☐   ☐

    poor   adequate   good   very good   unable to rate

4. Underline the phrases or sentences in the account that helped you decide on these ratings.

5. In your own words, describe the characteristics of this school leader's performance.
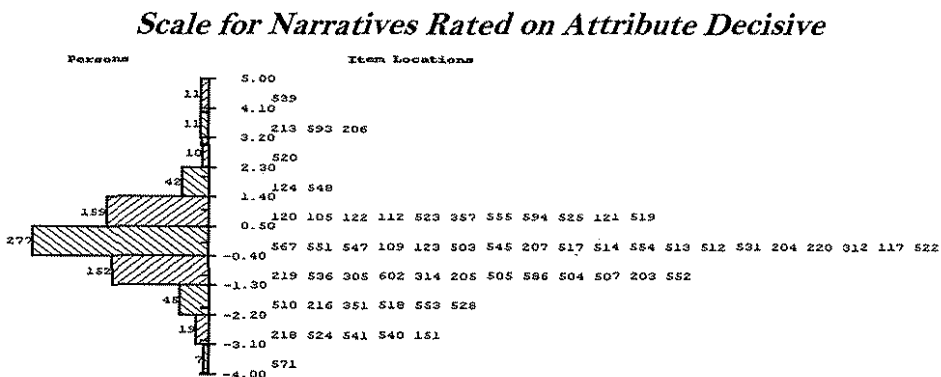

Rasch statistical analyses of the ratings were made initially using the Extended Logistics Model of Rasch (Andrich, 1991; Wright & Masters, 1982) and later using the RUMM (Andrich, Sheridan & Luo, 2000) to identify patterns of variations in principals' performance depicted in the narratives. The Rasch analysis of data collected in 1997 and 2003 generated separate scales for each attribute. Figure 1 shows the scale for the attribute *fair* and Figure 2 shows the scale for the attribute *decisive*.

Figure 1

Scale for Narratives Rated on Attribute Fair

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Persons                    Item Locations
                      4.00
                  29
                      3.20
                  19  548 569 562
                      2.40
              54      527 552
                      1.60
        134           517 535 207 583 122 108 523
                      0.80
    174               206 593 116 556 564 529 512 102 577 111 561 551 353 205 509 539 101 568
                      0.00
    150               511 202 120 218 106 531 219 565 543 115 579 302 515 103 502 558 157
                     -0.80
           79         516 550 582 208
                     -1.60
                  20  542 154 598 595 513 504
                     -2.40
                  16  544 211 596
                     -3.20
                  5
                     -4.00
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Each narrative rated on *fairness* appears on this scale as a code. *The Jesus story*, coded 504, was rated 25 times on the attribute *fair*. This narrative was also rated 27 times on the attribute *decisive*, and 26 times on the attribute *flexible*. *Like a marriage* is coded 514 and was rated 53 times on the attribute *decisive*, 51 times on the attribute *collaborative*, and 54 times on the attribute *supportive*. Thus, while of the two narratives only one, *The Jesus story*, appears on the *fairness* scale (above), both of the narratives appear on the *decisiveness* scale in Figure 2 (below).

Figure 2

Scale for Narratives Rated on Attribute Decisive

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Persons                    Item Locations
                       5.00
                  11   539
                       4.10
                  11   213 593 206
                       3.20
                  10   520
                       2.30
              42       124 548
                       1.40
        155            120 105 122 112 523 357 555 594 525 121 519
                       0.50
    277               567 551 547 109 123 503 545 207 517 514 554 513 512 531 204 220 012 117 522
                      -0.40
        152            219 536 305 602 314 205 505 586 504 507 203 552
                      -1.30
              45       510 216 351 518 553 528
                      -2.20
                  15   218 524 541 540 151
                      -3.10
                       571
                      -4.00
```

All narratives appear on three different scales, corresponding to those attributes on which they were rated. The scale of the scale appears in terms of *logits* (Andrich, 1991). The location (on the scale of logits) of each narrative (item location) indicates the level of performance described in each narrative, counter intuitively arrayed from high performance at the bottom, with the most negative logit score, to low at the top, with the most positive logit score. The interpretation of the scale is that it is *easy* to agree that narratives located on the most negative end of the scale represent high quality performance, that is, these narratives are more likely to be high quality performances. Similarly, it is *difficult* to agree that narratives located on the most positive end of the scale represent high quality performance, that is, these narratives are more likely to be low quality performances. Such interpretation applies commonly to test item difficulty: difficult items are located at the most positive end of the scale; easy items are located at the most negative end of the scale (Andrich, 1991).

The horizontal histogram (person locations) on the left side of the logit scale represents the distribution of raters. The numbers on the horizontal bars indicate the number of raters: for narratives rated on *fairness*, the modal number of raters (174) is located in the interval 0.00 to 0.80; and for narratives rated on *decisiveness*, the modal number of raters (277) is located in the interval 0.50 to -0.40. For both the *fairness* scale and the *decisiveness* scale, the histograms show three important features. One feature is that the histograms are spread across the logit scales, without gaps. A second feature is that the histograms (person locations) are located within the same range of the logit scale as the item locations. The third feature is that the shapes of the distributions of person locations are the same as the shapes of the distributions of the corresponding items (narratives). Taken together, these features indicate that the narratives (items) are well targeted for this set of raters (persons) (Andrich, 1991).

These arrays lend themselves to clustering of items into three groups: narratives depicting high performance, narratives depicting middle or satisfactory performance, and those depicting low or poor performance. These three clusters of narratives represent variation in quality of performance, or levels of performance. Such levels are standards of performance of attributes (in these instances, *fairness* and *decisiveness*) for school leaders.

This application of Rasch analysis to judgements of the quality of leaders' performance depicted in narrative accounts (items) by school

leaders (persons) is innovative. Rasch analysis is found in an extensive range of applications in education and other social sciences. For example, the Rasch analsyis is used in examining the relationship between attitude and behaviour (Andrich & Styles, 1998), investigating the underlying structures of curriculum frameworks (Andrich, 2002), studies of student academic achievement and measures of behaviour (for example, Merrell & Tymms, 2005), and measuring item difficulty in assessment of early literacy and numeracy across cultures (Tymms & Merrell, 2004).

Both *Like a marriage* (coded 514) and *The Jesus story* (coded 504) are located in the middle of the *decisiveness* scale with item locations of -0.40 and -1.30 respectively, indicating that the performances of principals in both narratives are judged by other school leaders to be only satisfactory. However, the location of *The Jesus story* on the *fairness* scale is -2.40, indicating a relatively higher level of performance when rated by school leaders.

Working inductively from the content of the narratives in each of the clusters and with reference to relevant literature, we developed definitions for each of the eight attributes (*fair, decisive, collaborative, supportive, tactful, persistent, innovative, flexible*) and for each of the levels (high, satisfactory, low) of each attribute[4]. The definition of *decisiveness*, with definitions of each level of *decisiveness*, appears below, by way of illustration.

Decisive

> *Decisiveness* requires the ability to recognise when a decision is required and to act quickly. It is important to emphasise that it is not only the exercise of *decisiveness* that is a key element of school leaders' performance. It is also the way in which *decisiveness* is used in combination with other attributes and interpersonal skills. For example, if *decisiveness* is out of equilibrium with *persistence* and *collaboration*, the performance could be adversely affected.

> A performance indicating a **high level** of *decisiveness* will demonstrate clear and consistent evidence of making management decisions to promote a safe, efficient and effective learning environment. Decision-making will be characterised by a willingness to assume responsibility for taking action and accepting the consequences for upholding principles and actions. A high level of *decisiveness* will also exhibit a capacity to take risks in pursuit of school improvement.

A performance indicating a **satisfactory level** of *decisiveness* will demonstrate some evidence of making management decisions to promote a safe, efficient and effective learning environment. To some extent decision-making will be characterised by a willingness to assume responsibility for taking action and accepting the consequences for upholding principles and actions. A satisfactory level of decisiveness will also exhibit some inclination to take risks in pursuit of school improvement.

A performance indicating a **poor level** of *decisiveness* will demonstrate little evidence of making management decisions to promote a safe, efficient and effective learning environment. There will be little or no willingness to assume responsibility for either taking action or of accepting the consequences for upholding principles and actions. A poor level of decisiveness will not feature an inclination to take risks in pursuit of school improvement.

A feature of the definition of decisiveness is the tension between this and other attributes, such as collaboration and flexibility. Both too much and too little decisiveness can be considered poor qualities in principal performance. Too much decisiveness at the expense of collaboration and flexibility gives rise to dominating, autocratic, dogmatic behaviour. Too little decisiveness with too much collaboration and flexibility appears to be weak, prevaricating behaviour. Both too much decisiveness and too little decisiveness can compromise fairness in the treatment of students or staff.

For example, *Like a marriage* presents two incidents in the relationship between two principals in schools on the same campus. Different leadership styles require compromise from both principals in the interests of best practice teaching and learning. In one incident, the first principal supports the second principal and in the other incident there is no agreement. The first principal's *decisiveness* is apparent in the two situations described. The first principal acted quickly to intervene and support the staffing decision made by the second principal during the parent-teacher meeting. This prompt and effective intervention demonstrated mutual agreement between the two principals and helped parents to accept the changes. This action is an example of appropriate decisiveness. However, in the other incident, the first principal has a clearly defined goal for the school and a strong desire to follow it through. The decision to pay staff to attend an additional meeting is made without collaborating with the second principal. This is an example of inappropriate *decisiveness*. In taking this stand, the principals

have created an inconsistent campus policy and an unfair situation. *Decisiveness* is not used effectively as a complement to other leadership attributes, such as *collaboration* and *fairness*. Hence, this narrative is rated as satisfactory, rather than high, by other school leaders (http://isp.ecu.edu.au/ssl/index.php).

The definition of *fairness*, with definitions of each level of *fairness*, appears below, by way of further illustration.

Fair

Fairness is an inclination and ability to be just and impartial in handling school affairs supported by a close alignment of actions with stated policy. It is also the way in which *fairness* is used in combination with other attributes and interpersonal skills. For example, if *fairness* is out of equilibrium with *flexibility* and *decisiveness*, performance could be adversely affected.

A performance indicating a **high level** of *fairness* will provide clear and consistent evidence of inclusion of all members of the school community. Involvement of the school community will be pursued according to a professional code of ethics entailing the treatment of people with fairness, dignity and respect, and the maintenance of confidentiality and privacy. It will be apparent that the influence of office is not used for personal gain. There will also be convincing evidence that actions are applied fairly, considerately and closely aligned to stated intentions and beliefs.

A performance indicating a **satisfactory level** of *fairness* will provide some evidence of inclusion of members of the school community. There will be some indication that involvement of the school community is pursued according to a professional code of ethics entailing the treatment of people with fairness, dignity and respect, and the maintenance of confidentiality and privacy. It will be apparent that the influence of office is not used to personal gain. It will be evident that actions are applied fairly, considerately and closely aligned to stated intentions and beliefs.

A performance indicating a **low level** of *fairness* will provide little or no evidence of inclusion of members of the school community. A professional code of ethics relating to the treatment of people will be lacking. In some cases the influence of office maybe used for personal gain. There will also be little evidence that actions are applied fairly, considerately and closely aligned to stated intentions and beliefs.

In a situation of crisis, such as depicted in *The Jesus story,* a large amount of *decisiveness* with no collaboration, is appropriate. When school leaders in Western Australia read this narrative, they would have recognised the context: here is a school in a remote Aboriginal community with low literacy, low employment, high staff turnover and a low level of student attendance. The potential for a violent incident to escalate is defused by the school leader. As a consequence children are removed from the school, but returned when the parent has considered her actions. The parent later offers to assist with the end of year Christmas concert. She wants to be the person who tells what she refers to as 'the Jesus story', which in the Christian tradition is associated with tolerance, forgiveness and new life.

Fairness is a significant feature of this school leader's performance. Initially, the principal approached the angry parent, who was threatening a teacher and her class, and successfully removed her from the classroom. The principal was *fair* and respectful outside the classroom on the grass, and listened to the parent talk about her anger. The parent was allowed the dignity to remove her children from the school. *Fairness* was further demonstrated when the principal permitted the parent to enter the office to offer an apology for her earlier behaviour and also to approach the classroom teacher. Clearly the principal took the parent's concerns seriously because the situation was investigated further when time permitted. Finally, the principal is seen to confer dignity and respect on the parent by agreeing to her request to take a key role in the end of year concert. In this situation, *fairness* has been used effectively as a complement to other leadership attributes, for example *tact* and *supportiveness.* This principal makes decisions and acts quickly, without collaborating with other staff members. This is a serious incident, requiring *decisiveness* on the part of the principal. The *decisiveness* displayed here is appropriate for the context. Furthermore, *fairness, decisiveness* and *collaboration* are balanced in this narrative.

Four conclusions can be drawn from this discussion. The first conclusion is that quality of performance is not so much about *what* leaders do as about *how* they do what they do. In other words, leaders' performance is not judged by other leaders in terms of duties. Rather, the performance of leaders is judged by the extent to which personal attributes (*fair, flexible, decisive, collaborative, supportive, tactful, persistent, innovative*) are demonstrated in carrying out the duties (Wildy, Louden & Marsh, 2002).

The second conclusion is that what counts as quality in leaders' performance is context specific. We have seen that there are times when being *decisive* is appropriate, such as the crisis situation in *The Jesus story*. However, there are times when less *decisiveness* and more *collaboration* are appropriate, as in *Like a marriage*.

This leads to the third conclusion: higher performance on an attribute is not necessarily a matter of displaying more of the attribute, with poorer performance associated with less of the attribute. Too much *tact*, for example, inhibits clear expression of the message; too little *tact* is offensive. Too much *flexibility* in a leader's actions leaves colleagues wondering what the leader believes or stands for; too little *flexibility* gives the appearance of rigidity and narrow-mindedness. Too much *collaboration* wastes colleagues' time; too little *collaboration* smacks of autocracy. What counts as high quality performance is not so much evidence of large amounts of these attributes but evidence of the right amount of the attributes in a particular context.

The fourth conclusion is that the right amount of an attribute in a particular context is also the right amount in balance with the right amount of other relevant attributes. In the case of *The Jesus story*, the principal chose to act *decisively*, without time consuming *collaboration*, in treating the parent *fairly*.

Applications

This section reports two applications. The first application is a replication of the research process in New Zealand. The second application is a set of practices based explicitly on the Leadership Framework described in this paper; these practices have been adopted by school leaders and system personnel within the Western Australian state education authority.

The New Zealand study was both smaller and quicker than the Australian study, conducted over a six month period, involving only 14 narratives generated in one school region, rated by 34 principals on six dimensions of performance (Wildy, Robertson & Louden, 2000). However, its finding is quite clear: this approach to developing standards is applicable in a setting with features similar to the Australian context but also some distinct differences.

Two points emerge from the replication. First, narratives generated in one context are not applicable in a different cultural setting. Because

the method is built on narratives which capture the local and particular elements in principals' work, the materials on which the standards are based need to be developed locally. Despite this, the replication study demonstrated that there are enduring and generic tensions and dilemmas that challenge principals, regardless of the context in which they work. These more general issues are illustrated with particular features of the local context. Second, the attributes identified in the Australian setting are similar to, but not the same as, those with which principals in New Zealand make judgements about the quality of principal performance. For example, the attributes *fair* and *flexible* were less frequently identified as indicators of quality in the New Zealand study than were identified in the Australian study. Instead, the attributes *ethical* and *visionary* were more frequently used. The historic and cultural reasons for these practices are discussed elsewhere (Louden & Wildy, 1999a; Wildy, Louden & Robertson, 2000).

The New Zealand replication was important given the international context in which many school systems are moving towards standards-based approaches to educational improvement. Too often, the attempt to provide universal standards eliminates the contextual detail that is essential in describing and judging performance. By using narratives rather than lists of duties to describe the standards, the framework developed in Australia and validated in New Zealand captures standards in the context of everyday work. International testing of this approach was an important step in determining the robustness of the method of generating standards.

Since 2002, the standards for leaders have increasingly been endorsed and adopted by school and system personnel in Western Australia's state education authority. The attributes form the core of the Leadership Framework (available at http://isp.ecu.edu.au/ssl/index.php). School leaders can access illustrated and annotated narratives displaying different levels of performance on each of the attributes, in a range of contexts (location – rural, remote, metropolitan; school type – primary, district high, secondary). School leaders can also access the Framework through definitions of the attributes or through their application in a range of duties grouped under headings such as: Policy and direction; Teaching and learning; Partnerships; Resources. The key message to practitioners who seek to understand and improve their professional expertise is that the quality of professional expertise is not so much related to *what* leaders do (their duties) as about *how* they do what they do, that is, the extent to which the eight attributes are demonstrated in

the right amount for a particular context and in balance with the right amount of other relevant attributes.

School leaders use the Leadership Framework for self reflection for professional learning, in conjunction with a 360-degrees-feedback instrument designed to draw attention to the appropriate levels of attributes in leaders' everyday work. When school leaders are engaged in performance management processes with their line managers, they refer to reflective prompts (available at http://www.eddept.wa.edu.au/lc/fullcircle.html) to gather evidence of their performance in the job. The most significant use of the Leadership Framework is in the development of performance-based tasks used in selecting leaders for appointment and promotion. At the time of writing, selection tasks have been applied in the appointment of District Directors (2002, 2003, 2005), secondary school principals (2004, 2005), primary school principals (2005), district high school principals (2005) and a senior program director (2005). This complex and innovative application has attracted the attention of other Australian educational authorities (Wildy, 2004, 2005).

Conclusion

Four key ideas come from this research. The first is that the quality of performance of school leaders is linked to personal *attributes* that shape the way leaders act, rather than to actions or duties. The second key idea is that these *attributes* are interrelated in complex ways often between conflicting demands such as *decisiveness* and *collaboration*, or *flexibility* and *fairness*. A high level of professional expertise is characterized not by displaying more of an attribute but by balancing competing demands in particular contexts. Thirdly, this research shows that narrative accounts generated from interview data can be arrayed on scales showing variation in performance of *attributes* and clusters of narratives illustrate levels or standards of performance of the attributes. Finally, this paper has indicated that not only can standards for school leaders be specified and illustrated using this innovative approach; it is also evident that this approach generates standards that are useful and relevant to the practice of school leaders in improving their professional expertise.

NOTES

1. We acknowledge the leadership provided by Professor William Louden in securing the first of the two research grants and the support of Professors Louden (Edith Cowan University) and David Andrich (Murdoch University) in securing the second of these grants.
2. Data supplied from February 2005 Census by WA Department of Education and Training.
3. The Leadership Framework adopted by the Western Australian Department of Education and Training uses the term 'competencies' to refer to duties undertaken by principals and others in positions of school leadership. Examples of competencies used in this way are Improving learning; Negotiating accountability; Ensuring inclusivity. In this paper, therefore, we do not use Chomsky's term *competency* to distinguish between a performance and the underlying *competence* of which the performance is the manifestation. Instead we use the term *professional expertise* to distinguish between performance and the underlying competence which is manifest in the performance Chomsky (1965).
4. We acknowledge the contribution of Dr Simon Clarke, The Graduate School of Education, The University of Western Australia, for his early work on the development of definitions of attributes (2000).

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