Supporting learners learning for leadership in religious education

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Abstract

There are a variety of ways in which educational leaders and aspiring leaders in religious education may be supported in their own learning for leadership. In recent times much attention has been devoted to school leadership preparation in a variety of contexts. A range of systemic approaches to supporting educational leadership preparation and development has involved linking certain types of preparation to career structures. A growing trend occurring in many education systems links the attainment of a higher education degree to the career structure for leaders and aspiring leaders. This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a short term research project which sought to identify how those enrolled in tertiary studies might be supported in their learning for leadership in religious education. The participants in the study were leaders and aspiring leaders in primary and secondary schools enrolled in a Masters in Religious Education course. From the perspective of the participants the preliminary findings suggested that they can be supported in their studies through opportunities for mentoring, leadership development and networking. The findings are significant in that they provide insights from participants who have the potential to assist curriculum design reform and the delivery of such programs. Ultimately such reforms should be oriented towards meeting the perceived needs of lifelong learners and make opportunities for continuing education even more relevant for leaders and aspiring leaders particularly in religious education.

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Learning for leadership through participation in continuing education via studies in a higher education course has increased amongst leaders and aspiring leaders. The increasingly complex and multifaceted nature of the roles and responsibilities of leaders in all types of schools and systems has been highlighted by the work of international and intergovernmental bodies such as the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2007). The OECD's investigation into improving school leaders involved participants from many parts of the world including Australia, Austria, Belgium, Chile, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Korea, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. The OECD's *Activity on Improving School Leadership* (2007) emphasised the importance of proper preparation and ongoing learning for people in positions of leadership as well as those aspiring to leadership. Institutions such as the National College of School Leadership, Nottingham, UK and the Centre for Leadership and Learning at the University of London have set benchmarks for other leadership learning centres in a variety of countries to aspire to in order to form people for leadership. Furthermore many universities throughout the world have included courses within their education faculties which are oriented towards learning for leadership in education (Anderson et al, 2007). In recent times an array of systemic approaches concerned with preparing people for leadership have been linked to career structures (Gurr & Drysdale, 2012). This trend is also apparent within the context of Catholic education in Australia where in recent times a wave of leadership reforms across many dioceses have been specifically oriented towards learning for leadership in religious education through enrolment in higher education courses. This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a short term study which sought to discover how studies at tertiary level could further support leaders and aspiring leaders in their learning for leadership in religious education. The participants involved in this study were leaders and aspiring leaders of religious education in Catholic primary and secondary schools across Australia. One of the problems faced by many school leaders is trying to meet the demands of tertiary studies as well as fulfil demands associated with their professional role as a school leader (Chapman & Buchanan, 2012). The aim of this study was to discover how the participants involved in this study perceived they could be supported in their learning for leadership. The preliminary findings suggest that leaders and aspiring leaders in religious education can be supported through opportunities for mentoring, leadership development and networking. Prior to exploring the preliminary findings an overview of the literature and the background to the study including an outline of the research design is presented as it provides a context for contemplating the findings and possible recommendations from the study.

Literature and background informing the study

The trends in learning for leadership in religious education should not be viewed in isolation to the trends that have impacted upon school leadership in general. Therefore an overview of the literature guiding learning for leadership in education in general is explored in this section. Contemporary literature pertaining to educational leadership has generally been concerned with the achievement of improved curriculum outcomes for students, staff development, people management, staff and student wellbeing, and successful bureaucratic management (Barth, 2001; Buchanan, 2013b; Christie & Limerick, 2004; Durbin & Daglish, 2003; Golanda, 1991; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004). There are a number of avenues available for leaders and aspiring leaders to undertake in their quest for professional growth and development (Russell & Cransten; 2012). Research into the significance of leadership preparation and development as a means of developing the necessary skills to address current and emerging challenges faced by school is however comparatively limited (Moorosi & Bush, 2011). More research in this area is needed especially given the highly complex and challenging educational environments which require more sophisticated and successful school leadership than ever before (Gurr & Drysdale, 2012). Learning for leadership can take many forms; and Russell and Cranston (2012) revealed that many leaders and aspiring leaders preferred avenues such as the opportunity to access international expertise, professional reading, and membership to professional associations and continuing education by undertaking postgraduate studies at a university. Some dioceses throughout Australia have developed leadership in religious education policies that require such leaders to hold or undertake studies in a postgraduate qualification in religious education such as a Masters degree in religious education.

There are many advantages to be gained from continuing education. Russell and Cranston's (2012) research revealed that school leaders and aspiring leaders who undertook postgraduate studies perceived a distinct improvement in their leadership capabilities. They found that participant coverage of current research as well as exposure to an academic approach to learning about leadership theories enabled leaders and aspiring leaders to utilise this knowledge to confidently structure leadership change initiatives in their own schools. The research of Russell and Cranston (2012) identified some benefits to be gained from continuing education via postgraduate studies in tertiary education contexts. From a broader perspective other scholars have explored the reconceptualisation of university offerings as a means to support people committed to lifelong learning in Australian, European, Hong Kong, and North American contexts (Barrow & Keeney, 2012; Chisholm, 2012; Lee & Fleming, 2012). Although leaders and aspiring leaders value learning for leadership through higher education, little is known about how to best support these people in their learning. The preliminary findings reported on in this paper may contribute to narrowing the gap in the literature as this study sought to identify the types of support that leaders and aspiring leaders in religious education perceived they required to support their learning for leadership though the attainment of a higher education qualification.

Continuing education at a higher degree level requires a serious commitment. The stronger the commitment the better chance there is of success. This study sought to identify the kind of support needed to successfully continue education from the perspective of those studying for a Masters degree pertaining to leadership in religious education in Catholic schools. While the findings might be relevant to other continuing education settings in general, the limitations of this study are presented to illustrate the scope and relevance of the findings reported in this paper. The participants involved in the study were leaders and aspiring leaders in religious education in Catholic schools across Australia undertaking a leadership unit pertaining to leadership in religious education as part of a Masters degree. The participants were sponsored by the centralised authority for Catholic education in their respective dioceses. In some dioceses promotion to a senior leadership in religious education within schools is linked to the successful completion of a higher education degree.

It is plausible to perceive that the worldwide movements focussing on learning for leadership in schools contributed to the impetus for sponsoring leaders and aspiring leaders in religious education in Catholic schools to undertake higher education studies. Across numerous international settings, discussions about the changing expectations of leaders have contributed to a growing inclination that has resulted in reformulated visions for educational leadership. This trend identified a need for leaders to develop a deeper understanding of a range of areas pertaining to the exercise of leadership in schools. Significant attention has been devoted to research on leadership and leadership learning in education during the past decade (Anderson & Cawsey, 2008; MacBeath, Frost, Swaffield, & Waterhouse, 2006; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Peterson, 2002; Robinson, 2007). The lessons that can be drawn from the international body of literature are relevant and vital to the needs of all leaders in all types of schools however, Chapman and Buchanan's (2012) research found that while these developments were necessary for the development of leaders in faith-based schools they were not entirely sufficient. The growing body of discourse highlights certain aspects of the distinctive nature of leadership in faith-based schools (Bezzina, Burford, & Duignan, 2007; Cook, 2008; Duignan, 2007; Holman, 2007; Miller, 2007; Neidhart & Carlin, 2011). These distinctions are also relevant to learning for leadership in religious education in Catholic schools.

While the international trends in educational leadership development are relevant to all leaders, it is the distinctive nature of the religious dimension of a Catholic school that requires a critical examination of the religious leadership dimension in such schools (Buchanan, 2013a). At the systemic level education authorities supporting Catholic education in Australia have strategically encouraged leaders and aspiring leaders in religious education to participate in continuing education through higher studies in educational leadership, such as Masters Degrees as a means to achieving their career aspirations. Ultimately the goal has been not only to learn for leadership in religious education but also to lead in the light of the distinctive nature of leadership in a faith-based school. To achieve this goal the challenge for Catholic education authorities has been to ensure that learning for leadership courses offered at Masters level will provide leadership training in the areas of administration and management, pedagogy and educational aspects, while at the same time develop strong leadership in religious education. Viewed from a global perspective

attention to the distinct nature of leadership in religious education in Catholic schools is worthy of considerable attention given that Catholic education serves approximately 55 million children with over 175,000 kindergarten, primary and secondary schools throughout the world (Pittau, 2000).

The participants were leaders and aspiring leaders of religious education in Catholic schools committed to learning for leadership though enrolment in a higher education qualification through the faculty of education at Australian Catholic University. The participants involved in this study, perceived that they held demanding leadership positions in schools and felt that their professional role added to the complexities of the challenges they faced through their commitment to continuing education. While the course aims to address leadership issues within the context of the distinctive nature of leadership in Catholic schools, the participants' experiences of learning and the support they perceive they need in their learning may be relevant in broader learning contexts.

Research design

A brief overview of the research design drawn from Buchanan (2013c) provides a context from which to understand the perceptions of the participants that underpin the findings of this study. The participants involved in this study were enrolled in a Masters in Religious Education offered by the Faculty of Education at Australian Catholic University. The university is made up of six campuses across the eastern states of Australia. Enrolment in the Masters program is campus based; but once students are enrolled in the course they are free to enrol in units offered through any campus as well as those offered in fully online mode. Some units are offered in face to face lecture and tutorial mode, others in research mode under the supervision of an academic staff member and others are offered fully online.

Those who enrol in the Masters program are generally sponsored by the centralised Catholic authority having jurisdiction over the schools in which participants are employed. Each centralised authority is diocesan based and each diocese is responsible for the Catholic schools within its own geographical boundary. The centralised authority within each diocese is commonly referred to as the Catholic Education Office. Each Catholic education office determines the level of sponsorship offered to educators employed within their respective schools. This may take the form of sponsorship that covers the total enrolment cost of the degree or it may also take the form of study leave opportunities. Some Catholic education offices pay part of the enrolment costs upon successful completion of each unit studied within the degree. Keeping in mind the distinctive nature of leadership in faith-based schools, the Catholic Education Offices generally offer sponsorship to leaders and aspiring leaders to help build leadership capacity within their schools particularly in the area of religious education.

The participants who were invited to participate in this study were enrolled in a Masters unit which is generally taken in the final stages of the degree. The unit focused on various leadership dimensions which have been associated with the distinctive nature of leadership in Catholic schools (but not exclusive to leadership in such schools). These dimensions include educational leadership, curriculum leadership, faith leadership, spiritual leadership, ministerial leadership, and religious leadership (Buchanan, 2013a). The unit is offered in a fully online mode and those enrolled in the unit have access to the lecturer via online discussions, email and telephone communication. There are online discussion forums for students to interact with each other as a means to stimulate peer learning. The cohort participating in this study was invited because, by the time they enrolled in this unit: (i) they would have experienced the range of learning mode offered; and (ii) all members of the cohort were in leadership positions within schools or aspiring to be leaders. This cohort was deemed suitable to provide insights into discovering the kind of support leaders and aspiring leaders perceive they need from their university course.

There were a total of twenty-one people enrolled in the unit and at the completion of the unit a letter of invitation was sent to each person. The letter invited them to participate in the study. If they agreed to participate in the study they were asked to download a survey questionnaire from an online learning environment site, type their responses to the survey / questionnaire and return it via post in a stamped self-addressed envelope which was provided. The surveys were completed anonymously in that participants were asked not to disclose their name or any information that would reveal their identity. Twenty responses were received out of a potential of twenty-one participants.

The survey / questionnaire asked four broad questions about the type of support participants felt they needed to help them complete a Masters Degree. They were asked what type of support they felt they needed in general and what type of support they felt they need from the school in which they were employed, the centralised authority to which their school belonged (the Catholic Education Office in their respective diocese) and the university in which they were undertaking their course (in this case Australian Catholic University). This paper reports on the preliminary findings pertaining to the type of support the participants' perceived that wanted from the Masters Degree program offered by the university.

Founded on the assumptions that knowledge is constructed and that learning can only be understood in social contexts, this qualitative study was situated within a constructivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998; Daniels, 2001). It sought to construct meaning from the perceptions of the leaders and aspiring leaders about the support they conveyed in their responses to the questionnaire. The conceptualisation of the participants' responses to the questionnaire was guided by the principles underpinning the original approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967) to grounded theory. By intensive engagement with the participants' responses particular categories of findings began to emerge. According to Glaser (1998; 1992; 1978) the categories of findings should emerge from the data. Categorising the data in this way allows for the data to tell their own story (Goulding, 2002). This approach was appropriate because little is known about the kind of support leaders and aspiring leaders of religious education in Catholic schools perceive that they need if they are to engage in continuing education at a Masters Degree level. Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed that if one wants to know and understand a particular phenomenon where very little is known, one should ask those involved.

As indicated by the number of participants, this is a small scale study, but the qualitative researcher is not preoccupied with numbers of participants or numbers of participant responses as in qualitative research, events, incidents, and experiences, not people per se, are typically the objects of purposeful sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Glaser (1998; 1992; 1978) has emphasised that it is only necessary to stay in the field of data collection until the categories have reached saturation point. This is not determined by the quantity of participants but rather the quality of data, for saturation occurs when no new information or categories emerge from the data. Category saturation is an important factor that contributes to the plausibility of the study (Glaser, 1998).

Findings and Discussion

In terms of the type of support the participants felt they needed for their quest for learning for leadership in religious education three preliminary categories of findings emerged. The participants felt they could be supported through mentoring experiences. They also perceived that if their studies were oriented towards leadership development then this would support their learning and professional growth. Finally, the participants conceived that the program could help them to network and this would assist them in their learning and professional growth. Each of these findings is discussed in the following section.

Mentoring

Mentoring is commonly defined as a professional relationship in which an experienced person (the mentor) assists a less experienced (the mentoree) in developing specific skills and knowledge that will enhance a person's professional and personal growth. A range of literature has explored the role and success of mentoring leaders and aspiring leaders (Anderson & Cawsey, 2008; Daresh, 2007; Hansford & Ehrich, 2006; MacKay, 2006; Smith, 2007). The participants perceived that mentoring would assist them in their learning for leadership in religious education and leadership in general. They perceived that it would be beneficial to seek mentors from a variety of sources. These sources are reflected in Figure 1 and suggest that mentoring may occur in a range of educational settings and contexts. Mentoring is regarded as a significant form of learning for leadership (Lacey, 1999).

Table 1

Sources of Mentoring for Learning for Leadership in Religious Education

School Mentor(s)	CEO Mentor(s)	University Mentor(s)
How to be a leader in general	Bring RE teachers up to speed with using and incorporating current resources	Learning how to come to terms with loneliness and solitude
Day to day running of the school		Academic growth and professional growth
Running Meetings	Leading school–based professional learning / development	
Chairing Committee		Confidence to lead
To contribute to school leadership issues	Leading whole school and diocesan initiatives and events	Confidence and competence in trying new initiatives
		Linking theory to practice

The leaders and aspiring leaders in religious education sought out other members of their school leadership team to mentor them in their learning of how to be a school leader in general. They felt that a mentor of this calibre could help them develop skills and experience in leading the day to day running of the school, including running meetings and chairing committees. Mentoring has the potential to be an effective form of learning when it occurs "in an environment that's familiar and relatively comfortable" (MacKay, 2006, p. 49) and the leaders and aspiring leaders in religious education believed they could learn how to be a school leader with the ability to address the day to day issues that any senior leader would.

They also sought mentoring by religious education specialists in their centralised authority (i.e. Catholic Education Offices). The religious education specialists from their respective Catholic Education Offices were perceived as being able to mentor them in issues pertaining to leadership in religious education. They felt they could learn how to lead school-based professional learning in religious education for the staff members in their faculty. They also felt that the religious education specialists could mentor them about how to encourage staff to use and incorporate current resources in their classroom teaching programs. Furthermore they benefited from mentoring that would help them to lead diocesan initiatives that extended religious education beyond the classroom and involved all member of the school not just the teachers of religious education.

The participants also sought mentoring from their lecturers from their Masters course. Usually the type of mentoring required from academics is associated with attaining a higher performance in achieving the outcomes of the course (Hansford, Tennent & Ehrich, 2003). However in this study the type of mentoring extended beyond the pursuit of academic achievement (Buchanan, 2013c). It also focussed on issues such as dealing with complex issues at the school level, time management, articulating the complexities of the role and how that may impact on leadership in religious education.

Mentoring appeared as a key priority that would support learning for leadership in religious education. A Masters Degree in Religious Education could accommodate studies in mentoring which enable leaders and aspiring leaders to critically reflect on various modes and avenues for mentoring. Learning about mentoring and various forms of mentoring would enable participants in the course to consider mentoring options that might be relevant for their own learning. Furthermore academics could include mentoring experiences in their teaching and learning plans. A comprehensive overview of the ways in which mentoring might be incorporated in to a course of study is explored in Buchanan (2013c) The inclusion of mentoring within the curriculum and modelling its application in the teaching and learning process would help to highlight its relevance for those committed to learning for leadership.

Leadership Development
Drawing on international research, leadership development in Australian has focussed closely on improving school leadership activity through systemic, state and national approaches to building leadership capacity (Matthews, Moorman, & Nusche, 2008). The national and international trends pertaining to educational leadership development

have been oriented towards a wave of policies that aim to "embed the development of professional knowledge, competencies and dispositions in two wider contexts: Leadership capacity in each school and capability building in the host education system" (Macpherson, 2009, p. 107). These contexts encompass two major orientations to leadership development stemming from a passive leadership development approach from the systems based spectrum to an active leadership development approach at the school level (Hallinger, 2003). Both orientations are important to the leadership development of educational leaders and aspiring leaders. This broader picture of leadership development was also of concern to the leaders and aspiring leaders of religious education. They felt that in many situations there was no one to lead even though their role as a leader in religious education was a senior leadership position. They noted that other senior leadership roles within Catholic education had personnel that directly reported to them. However, as Figure 2 illustrates there appeared to be no personnel who directly reported to the leader in religious education particularly at the middle management level.

Table 2

Direct reporting to senior school leaders

Leadership Role	Direct Reports	Team Members
Curriculum Leader	Discipline Leaders	Subject Teachers
Wellbeing Leader	Year Level Leaders etc	Homeroom Teacher
Leader in Religious Education	?	Religious Education Teacher

Not only in relation to leadership in religious education but in leadership in general there is a lack of knowledge pertaining to the appropriate avenues for enhancing leadership development amongst educational leaders and aspiring leaders. While there are a wide range of programs across many different education sectors very little research has focussed on identifying the most suitable ways to offer opportunities for those committed to learning for leadership (Anderson et al. 2007). In relation to leadership in religious education a Master in Religious Education was perceived by the participants as one avenue where they could learn ideas about how to develop leadership potential in religious education in their school. The following Figure reflects some of the insights shared by the participants regarding possible ways in which the development of leadership capacity might occur in the area of religious education in schools. They felt that many of the duties they were expected to perform could be developed into middle leadership roles. This would help to build the leadership capacity across more staff members and also enable the leader in religious education to lead.

Table 3

Leadership Development: Building Leadership Capacity in Schools

Senior Leadership	Middle Leader	Teacher Leader	Teachers
Leader in Religious Education	RE Curriculum Leader	Year level curriculum team conveners	Classroom religious education teachers
	Retreat Program Leader	Retreat Team	Teachers and Students
	Prayer & Liturgy Leader	Prayer & Liturgy Team	Teachers and Students
	Mission & Engagement Leader	Mission & Engagement Team	Teachers and Students
	Social Justice Leader	Social Justice Team	Teachers and Students
	Staff Faith Development Leader	Staff Faith Development Team	Teacher and other Staff members
	Sacrament Program Leader	Sacramental Team	Teachers and Students

Leadership in religious education programs have tended to focus on exploring the dimensions of leadership pertaining to the senior leader in religious education. Consideration should be given to developing learning experiences that enable those who aspire to leadership in religious education to critically explore ways to develop leadership capacity. Each of the middle leader and teacher leader roles could be areas for study and critical investigation within a higher education program. While these middle leadership roles may appear significant what is vitally important is ensuring that these roles foster leadership growth and development.

Networking

The participants revealed that their experiences of learning for leadership through higher education provided opportunities for them to informally network with other leaders and aspiring leaders undertaking the course. Opportunities to network supported them in their learning for leadership. It enabled them to discuss issues pertaining to their studies and assignments. This occurred sometimes because an assessment task involved group participation and on other occasions it happened because individual members sought each other out to discuss issues pertaining to their studies and / or issues they were dealing with in their own schools pertaining to leadership in religious education. This type of networking provided an opportunity for leaders and aspiring leaders to speak with other participants who can listen in a calm and unconditional manner (MacBeath, 2011).

A feeling of loneliness sometimes associated with leadership and in particular leadership in religious education (Buchanan, 2013c) has the potential to drain such leaders of vision and energy for leadership. An opportunity to network is one way of minimising potential negative consequences of leadership loneliness (MacBeath, 1998). Networking was regarded as a vehicle that provided support for leaders and aspiring leaders in religious education in their ability to develop strategies that enabled them to remain connected and understand ways of "being without or beyond loneliness" (Stern, 2013, p. 107). Leaders and aspiring leaders need to look outside their own school context and establish memberships to networks that extend them beyond the school for sources of learning and ideas (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006). This is particularly necessary for leadership in religious education where only one member of staff holds the position.

The networking experiences encountered by leaders and aspiring leaders undertaking a Masters in Religious Education brought participants into contact with leaders beyond their own geographical location which is normally not the case (Anderson & Togneri, 2003; Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1998; Rosenholtz, 1989). A broader range of networking for participants increases the potential for exposure to diverse insights informing for learning for leadership in religious education. Hargreaves (2003) suggested that:

> A network increases the pool of ideas on which any member can draw and as one idea or practice is transferred, the inevitable process of adaptation and adjustment to different conditions is rich in potential for the practice to be incrementally improved by the recipient and then fed back to the donor in a virtuous circle of innovation and improvement. In other words, the networks extend and enlarge the communities of practice with enormous potential benefits … (p. 9)

The possibilities should be explored not only because the participants expect this type of support from a Masters Degree program but also because it has the potential to promote learning with and between schools and the co-creation and advancement of knowledge about leadership and learning for leadership (Jackson & Temperley, 2007).

External agents such as universities have the potential to play a vital role in helping leaders and aspiring leaders to learn how to network in ways that enable them to foster the development of schools that are able to utilise reflective intelligence (MacGilchrist, Myers & Reed, 2004). They are also able to illustrate the benefits of networks as a collective of critical friends (MacBeath, 1998) that understand the tensions of self-evaluation (Saunders, 1999). There is currently no independent professional association within Australia for leaders in religious education to facilitate networking opportunities on a broad scale. The higher education curriculum program could be adapted to ensure that opportunities for networking between participants is structured into the course rather than be left to happen informally and by chance.

Recommendations and conclusions

The preliminary findings arising from this study which sought to identify the areas of support leaders and aspiring leaders in religious education perceive would help them in their learning for leadership have been identified. They are mentoring, leadership development and networking. Each of these areas of support is relevant not only to their learning within a higher education course but they are also relevant to their lifelong learning as a leader and in particular as a leader in religious education. A recommendation arising from this study involves exploring ways to develop pedagogy that provides opportunities for mentoring and exploring ways to promote leadership development as well as networking through the participants' involvement in their tertiary studies. The skills gained in these areas will not only support them through their studies but also throughout ongoing lifelong learning for leadership in religious education.

Acknowledgement

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