The importance of department heads in the development of teacher support for school vision

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Abstract
Investigates how high school department heads may play a role in the alignment of teachers with a principal’s vision for the school. A survey study based on a theoretical position of the high school as a loosely-coupled system consisting of departments with distinct subcultures and department heads who are influential leaders is reported. As expected, principal components and multiple regression analyses suggest that behaviours of the principal which emphasise and reinforce the school vision, predict the extent to which teachers support the principal’s vision. However, the congruence of department heads and the principal, in terms of school vision, is a much stronger predictor of teachers’ support for the vision. To a lesser extent, stronger structural coupling between departments also contributes to teachers’ support of the school vision.

Introduction
The role of leader in defining and articulating a vision for organisations has been addressed by many researchers (Bass, 1990; Bennis, 1984; Conger, 1990; Fritz, 1986; Nanus, 1992). In educational contexts, in particular, the role of principal in the development and implementation of school vision has been given considerable attention (Greenfield et al., 1992; Leithwood and Jantzi, 1990; Sashkin, 1993; Staessens and Vanderberghe, 1994; Stalhammar, 1994; Starratt, 1993). However, the role of middle manager in schools with regard to school vision has not received comparable attention. Notwithstanding this, it can be argued that subject department heads, as well as principals, can be key players in the implementation of school vision. This paper will explore the role played by department heads in the implementation of school vision.

Theoretical background
Vision can be defined as an image of a desirable future (Manasse, 1986; Starratt, 1993) and is considered an essential component of school culture (Staessens and Vanderberghe, 1994). Lambert (1988) pointed out that vision is a starting point for all activities in a school. All work should result from the vision that determines the purpose of the school. Blendinger and Jones (1989) stated that:

Vision imbibes the culture of a school and school district with a purpose of what is important and valuable. Vision provides direction. It is a mental picture of what tomorrow can look like – an image of the future (p. 23).

Johnstone (1987) suggested that school vision should emerge from the set of values of the school and provide school members with motivation and enthusiasm. Effective principals were found by Blumberg and Greenfield (1987) to be capable of articulating a vision in their schools and encouraging school members to internalise and incorporate the vision in their activities. Sashkin (1993) stated that effective schools must have effective principals who create and translate into action a vision for the school. Such principals are required to have a vision, a cultural ideal for schools, and all school members should share that vision which guides all programs and activities within the school. Sashkin (1993) further suggested three major elements of visionary leadership: creating a vision, developing an organisational philosophy that incorporates that vision and serves as a guide of actions and programs, and actions of the leader that lend support to that vision.

Principals are not the only leaders in schools. In particular, in high schools, department heads are expected to fulfil leadership functions and influence the cultures of their schools. Arguably, the actions of these people may affect the implementation of the principal’s vision for the school. Departments may develop subcultures which lead them to a vision different from that of the principal. Therefore, the school may be subject to competing and conflicting subcultures rather than being directed toward a unanimously accepted vision (Maxwell and Thomas, 1991). To explore the influence of subleaders and subcultures on school vision in high schools, different levels of leadership should be taken into account. However, leadership is not the only salient variable when considering school vision. Organisational structure is likely to play an important part. Schools, particularly secondary schools, have been conceptualised as loosely coupled systems (Ball, 1987; Barth, 1988; Bidwell, 1965; Firestone and Herriott, 1982; Horne, 1992). Loose coupling may affect a principal’s capacity to develop and communicate a vision for the school. Weick (1976) stressed...
that loose coupling is not necessarily a weakness for such organisations. Rather, it may provide some advantages that allow organisations to deal with variations in their conditions. Moreover, teachers, like other professionals, work with a degree of autonomy which is consistent with a loosely coupled organisational structure (MacKinnon and Brown, 1994). It can be argued that such conditions have led many teachers to work in isolation and be limited to brief, informal, and fragmented interactions with their colleagues and principals. Teachers’ activities are student-centred and they tend to focus their attention on the classroom (Smylie and Brownlee-Conyers, 1992).

Siskin (1991) stated that “... high schools are fundamentally different structures from elementary schools, and one key anatomical difference is their departmentalised differentiation of specialised teachers” (p. 136). She further argued that departments influence teachers and teaching in high schools. Her research findings indicated that there was a high correlation between effective schools and the strength of their departments. Results of Siskin’s (1991) study also suggest that departments are meaningful subunits that play a significant role in “…the culture and authority of secondary schools” (p. 139). Moreover, departments may have different cultures, providing particular environments that reinforce certain kinds of behaviour, lead to different departmental policies and practices and result in different responses to external policies; department heads perform as middle managers in secondary schools and exercise power over their members. Siskin (1991) posited that:

1. “Departments are fundamental boundaries forming distinct subcultures within the school”.
2. “They provide links to and participation in the wider community and culture of the respective disciplines”.
3. “They serve as potent administrative units” (p. 154).

Moreover, Wilson and Corcoran (1988), in their study of effective high schools, came to the conclusion that department heads and members play essential leadership roles in effective high schools. Hence, it can be argued that the loosely-coupled structure of high schools allows department heads to make their own choices as professionals in the school, in a relatively autonomous workplace, and influence the development and implementation of a vision for the school.

The study reported here was carried out to explore how department heads and school organisational structure are related to the principal’s vision for the school.

**Research questions**

This research addresses two research questions:

1. Is the sharing by teachers of the principal’s vision for the school positively associated with the extent to which department heads shared the principal’s vision?
2. Are the department heads’ and teachers’ perceptions of the principal’s vision for the school related to school organisational structure?

**Methodology**

**The sample**

Department heads and teachers of English, mathematics, science, and social sciences departments of 28 high schools, randomly selected from a region of the Department of School Education, in Sydney, Australia participated in the study. All schools and respondents took part anonymously in the study. Codes rather than names were used for data analysis purposes. Of a total of 696 questionnaires which were distributed to high schools, 273 completed questionnaires were returned, indicating a total return of 39.2 per cent. It should be noted that in the period of data gathering, schools were involved in state-wide industrial unrest, including strikes. It is possible that this affected the willingness of principals and teachers to participate, and consequently, depressed the return rate.

Individually packaged questionnaires were mailed to those principals who agreed to participate in the study. Principals were requested to distribute questionnaires to the English, mathematics, science, and social sciences departments. Each package included a copy of the questionnaire, a reply-paid envelope and an explanatory letter to respondents. The explanatory letter explained the purpose of the study, as well as instructions for returning completed questionnaires using a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Respondents were guaranteed that all information would be treated with the strictest confidentiality.

The sample consisted of 59 department heads, and 214 teachers. The numbers of male and female classroom teachers were nearly equal, whereas 65 per cent of department heads were male. Approximately 60 per cent of the department heads had less than ten years teaching experience at their present school, and 75 per cent had held the position...
for less than ten years. Of the teachers, approximately 65 per cent had more than ten years’ teaching experience in total, whereas approximately 78 per cent had less than ten years experience at their present schools. The number of respondents from the social sciences departments was slightly greater than other departments.

**Instrument**

Data were gathered by means of a questionnaire which consisted of two main parts. The first contained 13 items related to the principal’s visionary behaviour which were concerned with articulating, communicating and implementing a vision for the school. Some of these items were adapted and adopted from the “Leadership practices inventory” (Kouzes and Posner, 1988). The second part consisted of 19 items concerned with departments’ subcultures, inter-departmental relationships, and the extent of agreement, by teachers and department heads, with the principal’s vision.

The survey instrument was piloted with a small sample of seven randomly-selected high schools in Sydney, Australia. After minor modifications, the instrument was finalised for use in the main study. All statements were scored on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

Two versions of the instrument were used in the study for the two groups of respondents (department heads and teachers) and only differed slightly in wording. That is, some statements in the teacher’s version were written using the third person, whereas the matching statements in the department head’s version were written using the first person.

**Analysis and discussion**

It should be noted that the prime purpose of this study was not to report the evaluations of teachers and head teachers of individual schools and principals, but to pool these evaluations to get a sense of the larger picture. Therefore, analyses were carried out at the teacher level.

Because of the exploratory nature of the study, and to parsimoniously identify simple structure, principal components analysis with varimax rotation was used to analyse each of the “principal’s visionary behaviour” and “school department” sets of items.

All items of the “principal’s visionary behaviour” set loaded on a single factor which is reported in Table I. This factor had an eigenvalue of 9.4 and accounted for 72.6 per cent of the variance and was named principal’s visionary behaviour. This scale had a high reliability alpha of 0.97. This indicated that the measure was unidimensional, which was consistent with findings in the pilot study. Principal’s visionary behaviour is concerned with principals’ practices which are aimed at identifying new opportunities for the school, and developing, articulating, and inspiring teachers with a vision of the future. It also deals with a leader’s behaviours which set an example for school members to follow that is consistent with the values which the principal espouses. Also, it relates to the efforts of principals to promote co-operation among teachers toward a common goal and to demonstrate the principal’s expectations for excellence and quality.

Responses to “school department” items were submitted to principal components analysis with varimax rotation and four factors were isolated using extraction criteria eigenvalue greater than one, scree test and interpretability. The factors were named:

1. head teacher-principal congruence;
2. department subculture;
3. teacher-principal congruence; and
4. structural coupling.

and had eigenvalues 7.6, 2.4, 1.9, 1.2, accounting for 40.0 per cent, 12.7 per cent, 10.3 per cent, and 6.1 per cent of the variance, respectively. The total percentage of variance explained by these four factors was approximately 69 per cent. The factor groupings are shown in Table II. Reliability measures of the four subscales are satisfactory, with alphas ranging from 0.73 to 0.94.

Head teacher-principal congruence refers to the extent to which department heads share and support the principal’s vision for the school and encourage their department members to embrace the principal’s vision. Department subculture refers basically to the department’s culture including values, goals, practical strategies for pursuing the shared goals, and the degree of adherence, cohesion, and co-operation between staff within the department. Teacher-principal congruence is concerned with the extent to which teachers share the principal’s vision and encourage and co-operate with their colleagues to make it happen. Structural coupling refers to the nature of coupling and the strength of linkages in the school organisation, the degree of interdepartmental co-operation, and the extent of adherence of different departments to the overall goals of the school, compared to their attachment to the department’s goals and values.
### Table I
Factor loadings of principal’s visionary behaviour items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The principal</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides teachers with practical implications of his/her vision for the school</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes efforts to unify the directions of departments/faculties toward his/her vision for the school</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages all departments/faculties to share his/her vision for the school</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes efforts to ensure that school programmes are consistent with his/her vision of the school</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides teachers with opportunities to realise his/her vision for the school</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicates school goals clearly to the teachers</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes outstanding efforts to promote his/her vision for the school</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describes the kind of future he/she would like us to create together</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involves departments/faculties in co-operative work to achieve school goals</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes certain that school goals are taken into account by departments/faculties in their planning</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows others how their future educational interests can be realised by supporting his/her vision for the school</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is consistent in practising the values he/she espouses</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has a clearly articulated vision for the school</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table II
Factor groupings of school department items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Loading</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Head teacher-principal congruence</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The head of my department/faculty attempts to get the department/faculty members to support the principal’s vision for the school</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The head of my department/faculty directs the activities of the department/faculty toward the principal’s vision for the school</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The head of my department/faculty feels committed to the principal’s vision for the school</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The head of my department/faculty translates the principal’s vision for the school into practice</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The head of my department/faculty takes every opportunity to communicate the principal’s vision for the school</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The head of my department/faculty shares the principal’s vision for the school</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Department subculture</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a set of shared norms and standards concerning teaching strategies in my department/faculty</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is co-operation among the staff in my department/faculty</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members of my department/faculty are committed to the goals of the department/faculty</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are happy with the way we do things in our department/faculty</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members of my department/faculty have the same set of educational values</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher-principal congruence</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have positive attitudes toward the principal’s vision for the school</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I support the principal’s vision for the school</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I encourage my colleagues to support the principal’s vision for the school</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structural coupling</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different departments/faculties in the school have different values</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departments/faculties in the school tend to work in isolation from each other</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My department/faculty puts greater emphasis on its own goals compared to those of the school</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The various departments/faculties in the school have few goals in common</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My department/faculty places its own values before those of the school</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Given the exploratory nature of the study, the unweighted means of raw aggregated item scores were used to calculate factor scores for regression analysis (Hair et al., 1995). Teacher-principal congruence was treated as the dependent (criterion) variable, and principal’s visionary behaviour, head teacher-principal congruence, department subculture, and structural coupling were entered stepwise as independent variables.

Table III shows that three independent variables were entered into the regression equation:
1. head teacher-principal congruence was the best predictor and accounted for 48 per cent of the variance;
2. principal’s visionary behaviour; and
3. structural coupling accounted for another 13 per cent and 1 per cent of variance, respectively.

Multicollinearity was not a problem.

To validate the regression model, the sample was subdivided into two random subsamples with almost equal sizes. Slight differences in subsample sizes resulted from missing data which excluded some cases from analysis. The regression model for one subsample was the same as for the full sample with structural coupling accounting for 2 per cent of variance. However, for the other subsample, the first two variables were the same, but structural coupling was not a significant predictor. Clearly, structural coupling is a marginal predictor. However, as the model based on the full sample is likely to be more stable (Kerlinger and Pedhazur, 1973) it was decided that it should be included in the final model.

The regression model may be interpreted in light of the stated research questions. First, in addressing research question one, it can be noted that the best predictor of teachers’ support for the principal’s vision is the extent to which the head teacher supports, shares and communicates the principal’s vision, and that it accounts for nearly half the variance. This suggests that department heads in this study played a pivotal role in the effective building and communication of school vision. As might be expected, inclusion of principal’s visionary behaviour in the regression model suggests that principals are able to directly influence teachers and align them with the school vision. However, the latter is arguably not as powerful a means of aligning teachers with the school vision as doing so by means of first aligning department heads. Finally, a tentative answer to the second research question has been forthcoming with the inclusion of structural coupling in the regression model. Thus, it appears that the extent to which school departments are isolated, and pursue different goals, is related in a minor way to the congruence of teacher and principal school vision. However, this result is not conclusive and further research is required to probe this issue.

### Conclusions

This study highlighted the importance of the role of department heads with regard to school vision and has suggested that department heads play a mediating role in the alignment of teachers with the principal’s vision for a school. This finding is consistent with other research (Barnett, 1984; Busher, 1988; Dunham, 1978; Early and Fletcher-Campbell, 1989) which broadly explored the role of department head in schools. It has been argued that department heads are key personnel in high schools (Dunham, 1978) and may be considered “... the driving force behind any school” (Early and Fletcher-Campbell, 1989, p. 102). Barnett (1984) attributed the power of department heads to their critical position, described as the “neck of the hourglass” (p. 53), in the flow of information and argued that department heads, being in the middle position in the hierarchy, may obtain and distribute information throughout the school. Also, they may provide information from the middle up by communicating departmental needs and concerns to principals. Whatever the sources of the power of department heads, consistent with other relevant studies in this area the present study has shown the importance of
the department heads specifically in relation to the principal’s vision.

Further, the results support the more predictable view that principals who demonstrate strong visionary behaviours, receive more support from teachers toward their vision for the school. This is consistent with the findings of Greenfield et al. (1992) which suggested that teachers who perceived principals to be visionary more probably shared the vision.

Furthermore, although evidence is inconclusive, in terms of structural coupling it can be concluded that strength of linkages between departments appear to be associated with greater alignment of staff with the principal’s vision. The stronger the coupling, the more co-operation between departments and the greater the attachment and adherence to the shared values and goals of the school. The results are consistent with the findings of other researchers (Harris et al., 1995; Rowan et al., 1991; Siskin, 1991; Stodolsky, 1993; Turner, 1996) that suggest departments are influential and meaningful subunits and they influence the assumptions and perceptions of teachers in relation to educational goals and school vision.

Finally, the results of this study have practical implications for principals and school middle managers. Principals should seek to harmonise departments’ subcultures with the school culture and school vision. In doing this, they need to appreciate the essential influence which department heads may have on teachers’ attitudes. In the first instance, principals would be advised to attempt to develop a sense of solidarity with the middle managers, by facilitating inter-departmental co-operation, making the communication of a unified school vision more likely. For their part, department heads should look beyond narrow departmental interests and appreciate their responsibility to assist in the development of a learning environment oriented to the development and implementation of a vision for the school.

References


Blumberg, A. and Greenfield, W.D. (1987), The Effective Principal: Perspectives on School Leadership, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, MA.


