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CHAPTER 1

Purpose and Passion in Leadership

Understanding and using the concept of compelling moral purpose prioritises the work of the school leader and is key to unleashing the commitment and engagement of teaching colleagues. In this chapter you will learn

- what 'moral purpose' means;
- the importance of using moral purpose to build commitment and guide actions and work – and the consequences of not doing so;
- practical strategies for involving stakeholders, identifying the needs of students, and using wide-ranging information to inform consensus-building around purpose; and
- how continuous learning, informed by concepts of lifelong learning and related values, refines common purpose and builds capacity in the organisation called school.

It was my second year as principal of Cloverdale Public School, a large multi-ethnic, multilingual, urban primary school. My work was becoming increasingly stressful due to a continual overload of demands for which there wasn't enough time in the day to resolve. More than 70 educators, each acting individually according to his or her own values, needs, assumptions and beliefs, created the feeling of a chaotic organisation without purpose or coherence. Instead of creating a beautiful fireworks display that was coordinated, where colours and sounds added value and coherence to the experience, it was as if someone had thrown a match into the storeroom and we had rockets, sparklers, and firecrackers going off in all directions. Because the school was larger than any I'd previously led, I found I was working harder and longer to stay ahead of the greater demands on my time. Our discreet caretaker Roberto, who was always at school first in the morning, had become accustomed to occasionally finding me asleep on the couch in the teachers' lounge and knew to wake me and direct me to the showers before anyone else arrived.

I had tried to become the 'super principal'. If a teacher had a difficult student, I could deal with the student for him or her. If a teacher was worried about a parent interview, I could handle that. If more resources were required, then I could find them. If a teacher needed to take his or her own child to the doctor, I could teach the class. These scenarios and many more like them, multiplied by the many adults in the building, meant that I didn't have enough waking hours in a day to fulfil so many needs and demands. I was constantly 'putting out fires' rather than building the capabilities of my teacher colleagues to *take charge* and fulfil the purposes of the school. Consequently, I ran out of energy. My weary body said, "Enough", and I took to my bed to recoup.

After taking a few days to mull over the purposes of the school and the effectiveness of my now beleaguered role, I finally concluded that the problem was a misunderstanding, on my part and others', of the true purpose of the school and my own role in helping to achieve it. Had I asked myself earlier what I could do to improve the life chances of all the pupils in my school, my role would have become clearer. In the long term, my present behaviour would help neither all pupils nor my teacher colleagues. In reflecting, I reached a few conclusions:

1. I personally could do little for the 980+ students in my school. What I could do was focus on building the capacity of and bringing coherence to the work of its 70 teachers. With increased capacity and purpose, they could improve the life chances of all our pupils.
2. My main role was to improve the quality of teaching and learning across the school by embracing professional and organisational learning.
3. I could not do anything about the first two unless I changed my behaviour and priorities. Instead of needing me to be the resident problem-solver, my teaching colleagues needed opportunities to develop their capacity and responsibility in order to extend their commitment and leadership.

I came up with a somewhat crude but workable credo: "I will not deprive my colleagues of the opportunity to show leadership and responsibility and will use every chance to enable them to improve their skills." Moreover, I resolved, "I will not do anything for another who, with support, is capable of doing it for themselves."

On my first day back at school after spending the previous 5 in bed, I was determined to try out my new credo. Michelle, a Year 2 teacher, was having difficulties with one of her boys again and wanted to know if I could handle it. "Well, no, Michelle," I said. "Let's both sit down with your boy at break time and see if I can help *you* resolve the discipline problem." Later that morning, I was walking down the hall and Catherine asked if she could take her class to the park. "Well, I don't know," I answered. "*Can* you take your class to the park?" I am sure she thought I was being a smart aleck, but at least I was turning responsibility back to where it belonged. It was a start.

I decided that if I was truly serious about changing the life chances of all pupils through improved teaching and learning, I would need to devote at least 50% of my time to my new role. Yet, how could I do this given the tremendous demands of my schedule? As Michael Fullan explains,

> On the one hand, educators are constantly faced with multiple innovations and policies that must be contended with simultaneously. . . . On the other hand, a host of unplanned changes and problems, including technological developments, multi-ethnic demographic factors, family and community complexities, economic and political pressures, and more compounds overload. Fragmentation occurs when pressures and even opportunities for reform appear disjointed, work at cross-purposes, and appear incoherent. Overload and fragmentation reduce motivation for working on reform as the situation lacks meaning or seems hopeless.[1]

It seemed to me that the secret to addressing overload and fragmentation was to uncover moral purpose and invest in the capacity of, relationships with, and leadership of my colleagues. I was not merely to be the instructional leader, but rather the leader of instructional leaders. I was to develop what Margaret Wheatley calls the Leaderful Organisation, in which every teacher contributes to the leadership and improvement of the school.[2]

MOVING TO PURPOSE AND COHERENCE

Having defined the problem of role and purpose in school leadership, I jump forward in time from Cloverdale Public School to my work several years later with a group of principals in order to show how these leaders experienced and approached these same issues. As director of a university–school district partnership, I met regularly with 20 smart and talented primary and secondary school principals. We learned a lot together as we struggled to make sense of pervasive, sweeping educational reform. Schools were expected to implement new curriculum in every subject and use new assessment, evaluation and reporting procedures. The concurrent loss of resources had led to less time for teachers to prepare their lessons and a reduction in staff for special education, English as a second language, guidance and library services. Changes in roles and relationships had occurred as principals, against their wishes, were legislated out of the teacher union and had to form a professional association of their own. At the same time as the pressure to perform mounted, teachers' unions were fighting the reduction in resources by working to rule and appointing shop stewards in each school. Principals with reduced resources and increased pressures suffered great overload and struggled to find purpose, coherence and satisfaction in their work.

Within our group of principals, even those who were renowned for the quality of their schools' teaching and student learning found it almost impossible to continue their efforts to improve student achievement. Rather than attending to the paramount work of building capacity and focusing on teaching and learning, more and more of their time had to be used to address administrative policy and accountability tasks. More and more, these school leaders were required to prove they were following policy that at times was at odds with their everyday reality – demonstrating, for instance, how more students were receiving second language learning support while at the same time the number of teachers responsible for this was being cut by half.

I have represented this phenomenon in Figure 1.1 with two continuums, each with two extremes. One continuum runs from *operational*, which may be thought of as administrative and includes reporting, recording, and controlling policy and the behaviour of others, to *teaching and learning*, which represents extensive participation in planning, coordinating and supporting classroom practice. On the second continuum, *compliance* is about checking, enforcing and supervising teachers with a view to ensuring they are 'covering' the mandated curriculum. In contrast, at the other end of the continuum, *capacity-building* can be defined as improving the capabilities and learning of all teachers to respond effectively to student need.

The intersection of the continuums produces four categories – or quadrants – to describe the work of principals and schools. Quadrant one is seen as growth-inhibiting, where the principal acts out a managerial role. The externally dictated purposes that drive this kind of school result in little ownership. Likewise, the curriculum is mandated, rigid and expected to be 'covered' in its entirety. School organisation and structures are predefined and the complexities and overload almost paralytic in nature. Teachers essentially do their own thing and work in isolation.

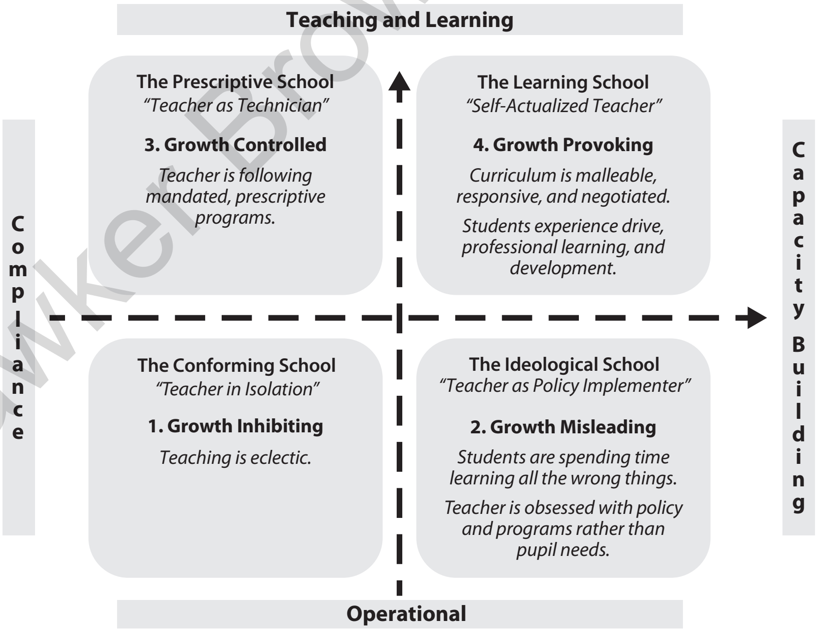
In quadrant two, the ideological school is seen as growth-misleading and is characterised by efforts to train teachers to follow specific approaches and policies. Policy and procedure are the name of the game, and leading without risk preoccupies leaders of these schools. Training tends to be expert driven from outside sources and often can be ideologically driven. Covering the curriculum is more important than helping individuals learn.

The prescriptive school in quadrant three is viewed as a growth-controlled school, which takes an approach in which teaching and learning are an important focus. Here we often hear about the 'teacher-proof curriculum'. Although support and training are minimal, the intent is to get all teachers to follow the prescribed program. Textbooks, worksheets, quick tests and quizzes are commonplace, as is regular monitoring of classrooms to ensure that teachers comply with the prescribed program.

In quadrant four, the learning school is viewed as growth-provoking, inspired by intensive, internally driven professional learning and development. The entire focus of the school is on improved teaching and student learning. The collective documentation of pupils' learning experience underpins the ongoing professional dialogue that is the mainstay of professional learning and development.

The four quadrants portray differing images of teachers and teaching. From a culture of professional privacy and isolation in quadrant one, we move to images of external control and manipulation in quadrants two and

Figure 1.1. Schools' Potential Response to Overload and External Pressures to Reform


Teaching and Learning
The Prescriptive School
"Teacher as Technician"
3. Growth Controlled
Teacher is following mandated, prescriptive programs.
The Learning School
"Self-Actualized Teacher"
4. Growth Provoking
Curriculum is malleable, responsive, and negotiated.
Students experience drive, professional learning, and development.
Compliance
Capacity Building
The Conforming School
"Teacher in Isolation"
1. Growth Inhibiting
Teaching is eclectic.
The Ideological School
"Teacher as Policy Implementer"
2. Growth Misleading
Students are spending time learning all the wrong things.
Teacher is obsessed with policy and programs rather than pupil needs.
Operational

three. Quadrant two, being more ideologically driven, is concerned with policy, whereas quadrant three, while attentive to classroom programming and teaching, relies on external mandates and the conformity of teachers. Finally, in quadrant four, we capture the image of the teacher as a professional. Deeply informed, working collaboratively with others on the crucial issues of teacher development and student learning, the teacher exercises professional judgment in negotiating the curriculum according to student need, passion and intentions.

Within our group of principals, as the quantity and complexity of new policy and the pressure to comply increased while resources decreased, school leaders found that they were being forced toward quadrant one as they struggled to conform with a flurry of mandates. Morally unacceptable to this group of talented leaders, this phenomenon was hugely stressful. In every successful school I know, principals spend the bulk of their time in quadrant four. When policymakers try to micromanage schools and their regions, principals find that they have to spend more time at the compliance game and less in building capacity, the critical work of the pedagogical leader.

What I have learned about being a principal from my own experience and from working with this group of 20 school leaders is that the intrinsic rewards, the fun and passion for the job, lie in learning to live and play in quadrant four. This represents my view of effective schools and school leadership. Leadership in schools is about mobilising the capabilities and unleashing the passions of colleagues in order to better fulfil the purposes of the organisation. Effective schools are those that deliberately improve the life chances of all students. For instance, in schools with significant numbers of new immigrant pupils, morally compelling purposes relate to ensuring the success of those who are disadvantaged by the demands of a curriculum designed for students who have a different first language and have grown up in a different culture.

The school's responsiveness to the diverse needs of individuals is a true measure of its effectiveness. How responsive the school is has to do with the capacity and coherence of the organisation and the principal's ability to build these values with colleagues. It begins with uncovering moral purposes.

UNCOVERING MORALLY COMPELLING PURPOSE

Educating other people's children is a deeply moral and ethical task. It involves making choices that ensure no child is harmed and that all (regardless of their abilities and experience as learners and their social, racial, linguistic and cultural heritage) have the opportunity to succeed. It means making decisions that are consistently and coherently grounded in the purposes of the school (that is, leading with integrity) and not being swayed or distracted by the immediacy of personal needs, tradition, external pressures, conflicting policies or constraints. In effective schools, educators are focused and bring coherence to their work. They have *taken charge* of the learning agenda.

Coherence emerges from purposes that principals, teachers, pupils and parents find compelling and that guide and focus the attention of school personnel and the decisions they make. This view of the work of schools raises a number of questions:

- What are the purposes of a school?
- Who decides what they are?
- Do they guide decision-making and behaviour, or are they merely wishy-washy generic statements?
- Do they evoke ownership, passion and commitment?
- How and to what extent do they relate to the real learning needs of all pupils?
- Are they realistic and achievable?
- Do the assessment and evaluation procedures truly reflect and inform the purposes?
- Do assessment procedures promote and provide information about pupils' genuine learning experience as they encounter the meanings embedded in the natural, social and cultural worlds they inhabit?
- How and to what extent do all stakeholders perceive the purposes of the school as morally compelling?
- How and to what extent do the purposes bring meaning to the lives of the people who work and learn at school?

As many of the predictable underpinnings of education (family, community, expectations, politics and technology) change rapidly, effective teachers and principals have found gratification, meaning and purpose in *taking charge* of change in their workplace. *Taking charge* usually begins with uncovering that which is enduringly purposeful, in terms of teaching and learning – by identifying, usually through a process of inquiry, the core purposes that are morally compelling to teachers, pupils and parents alike. Fullan tells us that finding moral purpose in education is necessary for making a difference in the life chances of students.[3] Identifying and