

# **CULTURAL AND SYMBOLIC LEADERSHIP – WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE? PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AND THE EFFECTIVE MANAGE- MENT AND LEADERSHIP OF A SMALL RURAL SCHOOL**

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The author, an experienced teaching-principal, used repertory grid technique to reflect on those tasks, professional relationships and school events impacting on his leadership. Use of supplied elements and a supplied construct facilitated the identification of the primary embedding mechanisms used to foster culture in his school, those factors most associated with his perceived effectiveness. Further reflection on these findings lead to the identification of future actions that might be profitably undertaken at the author's school.

Key words: *Primary Embedding Mechanism, school management and leadership, personal reflection*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sergiovanni (2006) states that symbolic and cultural leadership are present in excellent organisations. The symbolic force for leadership relates to those things the principal pays attention to while cultural leadership is about focusing the attention of followers on these matters of importance over time (Schein, 1992). Both Sergiovanni (2006) and Schein (1992) say that symbolic and cultural leadership need not be anything particularly remarkable; rather, it is in the day-to-day expression of routine work that these are expressed. Schein (1992) in his book about organisational culture and leadership identified a number of mechanisms by which the leader can foster culture in the organisation. These mechanisms are divided into two general groups; one is called the *Primary Embedding Mechanisms* (PEMs) while the other is called the secondary reinforcement and articulation mechanisms. The six PEMs are what leaders pay attention to, measure and control on a regular basis; how leaders react to critical incidents and organisational crises; the observed criteria by which leaders allocate scarce resources; deliberate role modelling, teaching and coaching; observed criteria by which leaders allocate rewards, and; the observed criteria by which leaders recruit, select, promote, retire, and excommunicate organisa-

tional members. It is apparent that these mechanisms can be interpreted as either matters concerning task completion, relationship maintenance, and as clearly identifiable events.

As part of their work school administrators interpret policy; execute curriculum; look after student welfare, equipment, and the financial and physical resources of the school; carry out staff induction and development, and nurture stakeholder relations with their school-community which includes staff, pupils, the parents and the department. School leaders are involved in goal-setting, assigning duties, consulting others, making decisions, initiating change, gaining support from others, monitoring progress, coordinating activity, and regulating the pace of change. Jirasinghe and Lyons (1996) surveyed 99 British leaders of schools to identify the main tasks performed by themselves in their workplace. Managing tasks and people figured most prominently, followed by working with information and communicating with others. Tasks concerned with making plans and motivating others were reported about a third more times than the next most reported task category which was about appraising, evaluating and developing people. Schein (1992) stated that those things which are closely monitored and measured by the leader are the same things where direct intervention by the leader is more likely to occur.

Following the 1983 publication of Donald Schön's seminal work 'The Reflective Practitioner', a number of professions, including education, have made extensive use of reflection as a means to understand what a professional does (Smith, 2001). Schön legitimises informal knowledge. In his book, Schön identifies reflection-in-action, which might be likened to 'thinking on your feet', and reflection-on-action, a process which takes place some time after the event, and is similar to the one used in the present study. Smith (2001) explains Schön's idea that an ability to think on one's feet requires that a professional has, at his or her disposal, a repertoire of images, ideas, examples and actions to draw on when faced with commonplace or unique situations. Reflective practice is about learning from these personal and professional challenges. Repertory Grid Technique, the research instrument of Personal Construct Theory, provides a semi-structured way for professional reflection to happen.

Personal Construct Theory (PCT) was developed in 1955 by clinical psychologist, George Kelly (Kelly, 1955). At its heart the theory accepts the fact that all people have a personal view about the world in which they live and that each individual uses that view to make sense of the events that occur and to anticipate the likely outcomes of future events. Kelly notes that people are just as likely to be able to adjust their personal construct of the world in light of new evidence, as to be unable to change in spite of new evidence to the contrary. It is the person, Kelly argues, who decides how important a particular event is or is not, and in their world view determines whether some constructs are subordinate, or superordinate, to other constructs, leading to a hierarchical system of constructs where the impact of inconsistencies can be lessened. Each person is able to determine whether the anticipated event is similar to a previous event, but not everyone will interpret the same event in exactly the same way, or attach the same level of significance to the event. Personal constructs are imposed upon events, not abstracted from them. Repertory Grid Technique (RGT), the research instrument developed by Kelly for PCT, was first envisaged as an idio-

graphic instrument by which a person (the subject) could come to understand him or herself better. This is how RGT was used in the present study.

## AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PRESENT STUDY

This paper presents a method by which a school administrator might identify which of those day-to-day expressions of work best exemplify his or her symbolic and cultural leadership and reflect upon these as a part of his, or her, professional development. Unlike a questionnaire it privileges the researched, not the researcher.

## METHODOLOGY

For the present study, the author, an experienced principal of a small rural primary school in the state of Victoria in Australia completed the suite of repertory grids at Table 1 to ascertain the utility of RGT as a reflective instrument. To create the elements in this study, descriptors arising out of the author's doctoral research were used that covers the range of interest (Farrell, 2009); whereupon the author provided his own examples for these descriptors.

Three created elements were selected at random, and using the triadic elicitation process a construct was created (see below). This process stopped after nine personal constructs had been created whereupon a tenth construct, where *being effective* is at one end and *being ineffective* is at the other, was completed by the author. Significant correlations ( $>0.75$ ) between the supplied and created constructs identified those constructs perceived to be most associated with being effective and ineffective. Within each grid – tasks, professional relationships, and school events – each created construct was correlated with all the other created constructs. Of particular interest were those grids that generated more significant correlations, and those constructs that correlated with more than one other construct.

*Cultural and symbolic leadership – what does it look like?*

Table 1. Repertory grids used to understand the fostering of culture

<b>Elements</b>	<b>Tasks (Descriptors)</b>	<b>Professional Relationships (Descriptors)</b>	<b>School Events (Descriptors)</b>
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A task that is time-consuming</li> <li>2. A task that is particularly important to get right</li> <li>3. A task that is particularly difficult to get right</li> <li>4. A task where there are few resources</li> <li>5. A task that takes little time</li> <li>6. A task that is not at all that important to get right</li> <li>7. A task that is particularly easy to get right</li> <li>8. A task where there are plenty of resources</li> <li>9. A task that is formally delegated</li> <li>10. A task that is informally delegated</li> <li>11. A task that cannot be delegated</li> <li>12. Any other school task</li> <li>13. Preferred pole</li> <li>14. Implicit pole</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A school council member</li> <li>2. A peer</li> <li>3. a superior</li> <li>4. A more difficult subordinate</li> <li>5. A less difficult subordinate</li> <li>6. A more difficult parent</li> <li>7. A less difficult parent</li> <li>8. A more difficult student</li> <li>9. A less difficult student</li> <li>10. Any other relationship</li> <li>11. Preferred pole</li> <li>12. Implicit pole</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A recurrent event</li> <li>2. A surprising event</li> <li>3. An event which caused/causes division</li> <li>4. An event which united/unites</li> <li>5. An event in which you had no choice</li> <li>6. An event which you orchestrated</li> <li>7. An event where you were able to reward positive action</li> <li>8. An event where you challenged an unacceptable situation.</li> <li>9. Any other school event</li> <li>10. A non-school event</li> <li>11. Preferred pole</li> <li>12. Implicit pole</li> </ol>

The grids were created within Microsoft Excel™. The calculation of correlations was carried out using the correlation function provided by the software. The random number generator function was used to identify the three elements from which a construct would be triadically elicited. Triadic elicitation required the author to determine how one element is different to the other two. The different element was given a score of one whilst the two others were each scored five. Every other element was then scored against the same criteria. The preferred end of the construct was identified at this time. On completing the grid, two new elements, preferred

pole and implicit pole, were created and scored according to the scores, given to the preferred and implicit ends of each personal construct. Significant correlations (>0.75) between these supplied elements and the ones created identified the Primary Embedding Mechanisms (PEMs) that the author used to foster culture in his school. It is important to note that a correlation does not imply a cause and effect, merely an association between the two arrays.

For the purposes of this reflective study, the PEMs and perceived effectiveness constructs were reflected upon in light of relevant literature. From these reflections it was possible to identify

future actions that might undertaken by the author to further foster the desired culture in his school.

## BACKGROUND

The author is a 48 year old male who has been teaching for more than eight years. He was appointed head-teacher of his current school in rural Victoria (Australia) over seven years ago. Since being appointed the state department of education translated all head-teachers classifications into principal class officers. This very small rural government primary school has had enrolments of around 20 to 25 students during the period the author has been responsible for it. The school is located a short drive from a regional city and its parents are a mixture of small business owners, salaried professionals, and wage-earners mostly living on large blocks of land. There is only one farming family attending the school. At the school there are two classrooms, one taught by the author and the other by an experienced teacher, who herself has been at the school for nearly two decades. Other teachers visit the school part-time and include art, library and language educators. The school operates a playgroup, provides voluntary music tuition, and assistance with literacy via an aide to students with additional learning needs. The school bursar attends the school three days a fortnight. The school is clustered with six other small schools in the local area and the author is the chairperson of this group.

Leach et al. (2001) made the following observations about analysing repertory grids: That the original grid “keeps you closest to the client’s words and meanings” and went on to suggest that this should be your starting point for analysis. Following this advice in the present study, it is the author who provided the commentary for the significant correlations ( $> 0.75$ ).

## RESULTS

### Primary Embedding Mechanisms (PEMs)

Significant correlations were calculated between the supplied, preferred pole and six other elements suggesting a number of PEMs for this school leader. Four elements were concerned with relationships with school stakeholders. Three of these referred to relationships with less difficult individuals like a staff member (0.97), a parent (0.90), and a student (0.90) while the fourth related to a school councillor (0.80).

*“The current president is a good man. He is logical, measured and calm, and always does what he promises. He asks good questions and makes sensible suggestions. It doesn’t get much better than that.”*

*“We have 15 families at our school and some make a huge contribution to our community while others only make a relatively small contribution. But everyone contributes something; even if it just a positive attitude about the school, when we are trying to resolve an issue, not that we’ve had many.”*

The remaining PEMs are a time-consuming task and a recurrent event. Teaching a class is highly correlated (0.93) while school council meetings are significant too (0.80).

*“The main focus for me is the long-term education of a well-known and understood group of children and the preservation of the school’s friendly and supportive culture. In my doctoral research I noted that teaching-principals are more engaged by system innovations that benefit student learning outcomes, contrasting with non-teaching principals who tended to be more concerned with how new departmental processes will make administering their school easier. In the end, it’s what I do. I teach kids.”*

*“I’ll be honest I used to hate school council meetings – I would even tell them [the councillors] that I hated school council because they would get hung up on minutiae; especially financial details. That’s not my thing – I didn’t become a head teacher to count beans. But now, it’s different – they are my community sounding board and we do strategic stuff. It’s about the kids, and what’s good for them. That’s a change that’s come through with the last two presidents.”*

### **Perceived effectiveness**

The author created significant correlations between the supplied construct *handling this task / relationship / event makes me effective – handling this task / relationship / event makes me ineffective*. Four constructs significantly correlated with effectiveness – ineffectiveness were generated. Two of these were constructs from the relationships grid. For this school leader being effective school leader is about effective relationships taking place with school insiders (0.90).

*“When people know the school well, they realise what a beautiful, precious thing we have going here. We are so fortunate to work in this place with these students and these parents.”*

*“I am so lucky in my staff both full-time and part-time. They are keen, enjoy what they do, and are ready to make a contribution to the school. The relationship I have with my teacher is particularly strong – our focus is the students and the school.”*

Perceived effectiveness also relates to dealing quickly and efficiently with events (0.84) that are not directly concerned with the schools’ own business. Being small means being flexible, whilst a lack of human and physical resources can be a weakness (0.76).

“Sometimes we suffer because we are few and we don’t have every skill-set covered. However, working with a small community of teachers, support staff, parents, school council, and the students, of course, we can be really flexible in our thinking. Because everyone knows the agenda or trusts me to do the right thing, we can be very quick to piggy-back onto unexpected opportunities. The new clustering arrangements [schools working together] are starting to make a real difference to how we operate – I can pick up the phone, post off an email, as well as work with other schools on curriculum”.

Turning our attention to the significant correlations between the generated constructs: Seven significantly correlated constructs were generated in the professional relationships grid; three in the school events grid, and two in the task grid.

### **Professional relationships**

There were seven significant constructs. Of these, the constructs which correlated with more than one other construct, were:

- *It’s professional – It’s personal* (three times);
- *There is a shared agenda – The agenda is personal*;
- *Interested in the school – Interested in themselves*;
- *Set’s the school tone – Spoils the school tone*, and;
- *Adds value to the school – Reduces value of the school*.

*“With the shift to clusters under the new network arrangements we now enjoy a lot of professional interactions with other schools, other teachers, and other school leaders. At first I felt the arrangement was a challenge to our independence but it has not been prescriptive, I feel supported actually and that is good because you can get professionally isolated in a small school.”*

*“I am really lucky that so many parents help out in so many ways out our school. There are the leaders, and for the most part you point them in the right direction and let them get on with it. They may not necessarily do everything the way I would but their heart is in the right place, and they really are helping to make this school a special place to be. There are also the followers, the foot soldiers, and you need them too. They free up the leaders.”*

*“Insiders set the tone of the school. You hope they are positive people who just want a great situation. There can be blips and minor setbacks but if the culture is positive and strong then that’s all they’ll be. We had this kid from another school, supposed to be a real handful, who came to us to ‘re-invent’ himself, according to his mother. I was worried I’ll tell you. This kid could have ruined everything. I told them (the boy and his mother) that if he really wanted things to be different then he had to make a real effort. If he did that, gave the school a chance, then the school culture would take over, and you know it did. That kid is no problem at all.”*

Constructs, which were significantly correlated with only one other construct, were:

- *It’s about education – It’s about management;*
- *In regular contact with the school – In irregular contact with the school, and;*
- *Knows the school well – Does not know the school well.*

*“A shared educational agenda is strategic and powerful. We only just discovered this in the last couple of years and it has changed the way we work together. Dealing with people’s personal agenda is more about managing a situation. Stakeholder dysfunction just kills creativity.”*

### School events

Three significant correlations were found. The following construct: *There is time for consideration – There are short lead times* correlated with the following two constructs:

- *Its about students – Its about process, and*
- *It improves the culture – It undermines the culture.*

*“Students are our core business. What they need, what encourages them and what brings them on, is where our interest needs to be. In our small school of just two classrooms and the children spending three and then four years in each classroom. We really know these kids. We can really provide for their individual needs. We can be distracted by the form-filling and the box-ticking but this is getting better than it was.”*

*“You have to think about the impact of what you do even if it is to introduce a system-wide innovation. I’m just the steward of the school and I want what’s best for the school and the kids. I certainly don’t want to upset the families. They trust me, and that’s a big responsibility. They may not always understand what’s going on so they rely on me, on us, to work in the best interests of the kids.”*

Being in charge of events rather responding to them is much preferred.

- *It relates to the school – It does not relate to the school and*
- *It is a process orchestrated by me – I am responding to others.*

*“Bureaucratic form filling for the sake of other people really irritates me. For example, I had to go on-line three times for the XXXX to register that I would be ‘a good boy’ about administering the XXXX test. Then I had to go back because I had failed to say who would be responsible for the tests. This gives me the XXXX – I mean*

*really, they can easily find out how many kids are enrolled here. In a small school the principal is responsible for everything, why have us filling in forms about the obvious. Who benefits? They do. This has nothing to do with kids. Whereas, if the process is to be orchestrated by me, and is specific to the needs of the school, I welcome that - bring it on."*

## **Tasks**

In addition to the correlations about being effective or ineffective discussed above there were just two significantly correlating constructs. One related to the flexibility of being able to rely just on yourself to get things done whilst also recognising that this can be a weakness.

- *Can be creative – Cannot be creative and*
- *It's about education – It's about management.*

*"Sometimes you have to just fill in the forms and tick the boxes and it has nothing to do with education at all. But being such a small set-up our flexibility with respect to education is almost breath-taking. Our kids design curriculum. They can, for the most part, be left to just get stuff done. Their independence as learners is assured. We will soon have one-to-one student computer ratios and that will really get us being creative about education."*

## **DISCUSSION**

The primary embedding mechanisms used by the author to foster school culture are made apparent by the importance of having positive relationships with positive stakeholders, being intimately involved in the core business of teaching at his school, and working with his school council in an effective and professional manner. These are the matters that he pays attention to, measures and controls on a regular basis (Schein, 1992). The author prefers to be in control of

events rather than responding to them. The author perceives his effectiveness as a function of the positive relationships he has with school insiders and their trust in his ability to flexibly run the school and competently educate their children.

The richest data in this investigation came from the relationship grid. Relationships with stakeholders can be very important but each stakeholder group can have different expectations of the principal (Cleary Gilbert, Skinner, & Dempster, 2008). In a study of 12 new teaching-principals in Queensland, Australia, Cleary Gilbert et al. (2008) noted that bursary staff anticipate that the principal will have a good understanding of financial matters irrespective of their level of experience; teacher aides expect that the principal can communicate effectively and maintain positive relationships with all members of the community; teaching staff looked forward to the teaching-principal displaying assertiveness with the school council and community, excellent classroom management skills, and strong pedagogical skills for the multi-level learning environment; school councillors expected a teaching-principal to be a good communicator, to be able to deal with student behaviour, to be able to provide educational support to those that needed it, and to have the personality to lead, and; superiors had an expectation that the teaching-principal would build community relations, manage conflict, and communicate effectively with the wider community.

Another significant PEM for the author is teaching and working with children. Jones and Connolly (2009) used repertory grid technique to interview 12 experienced principals working in Welsh primary schools in the United Kingdom. The grids created in that study were focused on tasks identified by the participants that resulted from prompt questions like name an important task, name another, what tasks take a long time, what are one-off events *etc.* Combining the 97 elements created by the 12 participants where they overlapped produced 12 themes. Those themes referred to more frequently might be likened to the PEMs created in the present study. Working directly with children generated 20 elements nine related to teaching or preparing

learning materials and six referred to dealing with their needs (Jones & Connolly, 2009). In the same study (Jones & Connolly, 2009) 84 constructs were analysed and aggregated to identify construct themes of which *children* figured most prominently.

The final PEM was concerned with the relationship with the school councillor and, by extension the school council. For small school leaders in Scotland an 'outward looking perspective' for professional purposes is combined with a more cautious approach to relationships with the community served by the school (Wilson & McPake, 1998). While recognising the importance of support from parents and the school councils, and expressing the desire that they become more actively involved in the life of the school, school administrators are also very aware of local sensitivities (Wilson & McPake, 1998). School administrators of small schools recognise the limitations of parental or community involvement: the feeling is that parents are unlikely to be interested in the details of running the school although they will provide practical help in a variety of ways (Wilson & McPake, 1998).

Constructs around perceived effectiveness were about having being able to work in a flexible way with a small number of dedicated people while handling non-educational or non-school tasks quickly and effectively. There was a high level of resentment, as indicated by extensive commentary, by the author about dealing with bureaucratic matters. Coping with administrative paperwork has been identified as the single most significant strain for teaching-principals in New Zealand, especially by beginner teaching-principals (Collins, 2004). Leaders of small schools have limited opportunities for delegation and are very conscious of the importance of not overburdening staff (Wilson & McPake, 1998). Where the teaching-principal is a teacher first and an administrator second, some management and leadership functions might be neglected such as meeting and working with other teachers, handling emergencies, carrying out clerical and administrative work, developing curriculum, liaison with secondary schools, planning, meeting parents, relations with student support services (Reid, Bullock, & Howarth, 1988) and

providing appropriate support and supervision of staff.

## FURTHER REFLECTION AND POSSIBLE FUTURE ACTIONS

Based upon the present self-study, there are two areas of interest that the author might investigate to further foster the culture in his school. The first is about improving the quality of relationships with school outsiders. The second area is to implement a change in some of the organisational processes used in his small school. The desired outcome from improvements in both areas would be to free up more time for the education of children.

A start has been made to improving the quality of relationships with school outsiders who might be pursuing a different agenda to the school, but it is not of the same quality and depth as that enjoyed with school insiders. This might be achieved in a number of ways:

- “Engage more positively with the representatives of my cluster, network and regional office. Share my skills, knowledge and experience outside my school and attempt to influence the direction of these groups.”
- “Rather than complaining about the bureaucratic requirements of being part of a larger system, make use of their power and resources to drive desired change within my school. Filling in forms is just the cost of doing business, and
- With this in mind try and bring about greater alignment between the aims and objectives of the school and the goals of the larger organisation.”

Collins (2004) noted successful administrators of larger small schools (6-7 teachers) in New Zealand ring-fenced blocks of time (to focus on one particular task and see it through to completion), delegated the task to someone else, shared responsibility for the task with a team and attempted to influence change via an instructional leadership approach (Collins, 2004). Wilson and McPake (1998) recorded that small school heads in Scotland tend to share tasks rather than



delegate because of a lack of expertise. However this support is not always available. What is possible depends on who you have on your staff (Torrington & Weightman, 1993).

Staff quality is a real issue in small schools given the impact one poor teacher can have on student outcomes while high teaching-load of a teaching-principal can prevent adequate supervision and teacher development. Southworth (2002) observed that being time-poor was a feature of the professional life of the teaching-principals in small British schools. The author enjoys a close and professional relationship with his small staff; each of whom are dedicated to the students, and to the school. Useful work on improving the organisational performance of his school might be achieved in a number of ways:

- Counter-intuitively it is argued that teaching-principals need targeted assistance to improve their teaching of their multi-level classroom as it is this facet of their working life that can create the greatest strain (Collins, 2004). Therefore I need to privilege the professional development of teaching staff and myself to make us more effective in a multi-level classroom environment. Gains in the classroom will offset the stresses felt dealing with bureaucratic matters.
- Continue to include staff in managing matters of strategic and educational importance, thus raising their capacity to help lead and manage the school too, and
- Identify general administrative tasks which might routinely be addressed on a particular day or at a particular time.

## CONCLUSION

The use of the grids outlined at Table 1, has facilitated the participant being able to highlight and privilege the symbolic and cultural aspects of his leadership (Sergiovanni, 2006). The use of supplied elements to highlight PEMs was found to indicate which elements are the most attractive to the participant as well as those elements he is averse to. The significant correlation between

the supplied construct of being effective or ineffective privileged particular personal constructs enabling the self-discovery of those qualities most valued. The commentary around the significantly correlated constructs relating to tasks, professional relationships and school events, provided a means for the participant to reflect upon his professional world. However, it is in the further reflection and the identification of possible future actions that the procedure described here gains real traction as a professional development process.

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