

Leadership for School Reform: Do Principal Decision-Making Styles Reflect a Collaborative Approach?

[Raymond B. Williams](#)
St. Thomas University

Abstract

Economic growth in New Brunswick is increasingly dependent on the improvement of our educational system. Current initiatives to reform education and improve student performance are based on transforming the province's schools into professional learning communities (PLCs). A key factor that will determine this reform's success is the capacity of principals to adopt a collaborative leadership style. This paper examines a study of principal decision-making and the forces both for and against the adoption of the collaborative leadership style required to implement the current school reform. While the majority of principals studied, exhibit the capacity to lead using a collaborative decision-making style, the bureaucratic system in which they work may be preventing them from doing so.

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Introduction

School reform has and will continue to be an important cornerstone of government's economic growth plans. This paper examines New Brunswick's new educational policy and a key strategy for its implementation, the transformation of schools into professional learning communities (PLCs). This transformation is based on an approach to school leadership that relies substantially on principals' capacity to adopt a collaborative leadership style. The study presented provides insight into decision making, a vital component of New Brunswick principals' leadership styles, and presents a cautiously optimistic view for the success of this latest reform.

Public School Reform in New Brunswick

In 2002, the New Brunswick government published its policy statement on education, thereby beginning the most recent efforts to improve public education in the province (Department of Education, 2002). *Quality Schools, High Results*, one component of the government's quality learning agenda, outlined an ambitious ten year program to reform K-12 schooling and set as its goal the creation of "a world-class public education system that aspires to excellence and achievement at all times" (p. 16). The document called for parents, students and local communities to work with school-based professionals as partners in education and learning with the specific objective to promote strong successful schools within communities. Underlying this objective we find the focus of this paper: the reliance of this reform on collaborative school leadership. Although the policy statement acknowledged the importance of effective administration, it centered on the role of principals in providing "strong leadership in instruction ... inspiring and motivating teachers, and advancing learning in their school communities" (p. 37). More specifically, the policy challenged principals to become "agents of change" who "create schools which are learning centres" which it defined as places that advance learning "through collaboration and the exchange of ideas and best practices" (p. 37). Although worded in general terms, these leadership expectations mirror those found in the literature on professional learning communities. In fact, upon closer examination, many of the goals set out in the

government's quality learning agenda may depend upon transforming the current hierarchical model of school into that of a professional community. Actions taken by government then set the stage for this transformation.

Within months of unveiling its policy statement on education, the Ministry used its yearly principal meetings to initiate strategies for its implementation. Foremost in officials' minds was the need to redirect school improvement efforts toward the achievement of the targets set out in their quality learning agenda. In order to improve the quality of education for *all* students the focus of schooling would be shifted from effective teaching to effective learning. Such a shift would necessitate a re-examination of how teachers teach and why success for some students is so elusive. To support this shift, the Department of Education introduced school leaders to the concept of the professional learning community. Andy Hargreaves was invited to the principals' sessions to introduce the school and district leaders to the concept. In his presentation, *Sustaining Professional Learning Communities*, Hargreaves stressed the need for educators to replace "strings of interaction with enduring bonds and relationships" and to "work and learn in collaborative groups" by pursuing "professional learning with colleagues" (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 9). He also encouraged principals to embrace "distributed leadership and shared systemic responsibility" stressing the need for "data guided instructional decision-making" and the promotion of "continuous, embedded, focused professional development" for teachers (Ibid, p. 25). He further argued for periodic evaluation of school improvement as a way to encourage schools to shift from their positions as "strolling or cruising to moving schools" (Ibid, p. 44).

Two years later and once more at the yearly principals meeting, the first evaluation of the school improvement process occurred when department officials presented a report card on the school review process (Morehouse & Tranquilla, 2005). The results of a review of 144 schools, conducted over the period from 2002 to 2005, indicated that while some schools were performing at either effective or highly effective levels most were underperforming and were either "strolling" or "cruising" (Stoll & Fink, 1996). The findings in the report card, which were based on the effective schools correlates (Lezotte, 2005), indicated serious concerns with: a) school leadership, b) teaching and learning, and c) areas of concern by grade configuration. Although difficult for many principals to hear these findings represented the first attempt to hold

schools accountable for their progress toward achieving the targets laid out in the government's ten-year quality learning agenda.

It is important to note that school leadership was the foremost concern arising from the school review process. The importance of this concern was no doubt reinforced by the recognition of two essential findings from studies on school improvement: a) the realization that the school is the unit of change (Lezotte, 2005) and the importance of principal leadership in promoting participation in school improvement efforts (Taylor & Tashakkori, 1997; Huffman & Jacobson, 2003). As with most school review processes the measures of school leadership focused on perceptions that staff, parents and students provided. Additional measures included policies and procedures observed during the internal and external evaluations. The expected leadership approach communicated by the kinds of data being gathered was clearly predicated on professional collaboration. The school review standards document used by Morehouse & Tranquilla (2005) evaluated principal's "sensitivity to teacher issues" (p. 8), a measure based partly on the development of "effective two way communication between principal and teachers" (p. 8). Principals were also evaluated on their support for "teacher participation in decision making, the degree to which teacher feedback affects most administrative decisions, and 'teachers' satisfaction with the decision-making process in the school" (p. 10).

While acknowledging the need for principal sensitivity, the primary measures used to assess leadership focused on principal decision-making style. This focus on collaborative decision making within the formal school review process, when combined with the provincial initiative in 2003 to promote distributed leadership and collaborative decision making, demonstrated Ministry support for the development of professional learning communities as one of its strategies to reform public schools. This being the case, it is important to review the literature to frame the concept of a PLC, determine its fit within current leadership practices, and examine the perspective of effective leadership in a professional learning community.

Redefining School Leadership

Brown and Isaacs (1994) defined the essence of a professional learning community in an educational setting, characterizing it as a school organization in which all stakeholders were involved in joint planning, action, and assessment for student growth and school improvement. Mitchell and Sackney (2001) stressed the need for professional reflection and collaboration based on a “learning-oriented approach that addresses the problems of teaching and learning” (p. 2). Harris (2003) described professional learning communities as places where a shared sense of purpose was developed as teachers “engage in collaborative work and accept joint responsibility for the outcomes of their work” (p. 321). She also argued strongly for the creation of an infrastructure that supported collaboration and a culture that reinforced mutual learning.

While the strengths of the collaborative leadership approach made possible by this kind of professional interaction may seem apparent, current authors on school leadership (Lambert, 2000; Ogawa & Bossert, 2000; Harris, 2003) contend that it seldom exists in schools. Ogawa and Bossert (2000) proposed that the primary approach to current school leadership was still based on a technical-rational perspective that promoted hierarchical structures and prevented substantive collaboration among school professionals. This technical-rational model of school leadership is founded upon principal omnicompetence rather than collaborative leadership (Hord, 2005). Emihovich and Battaglia (2000) reinforced this belief with findings from their study on the prevalence of collaborative leadership in schools. Their study found that most principals still perceived their primary roles to be building and program managers rather than collaborative professionals. Jackson (2000) considered the hesitance among principals to share leadership as partly due to the fact that the school effectiveness literature continues to propagate the view of leadership centred around “strong headteachers with dynamic or forceful personal qualities” rather than “leadership that is widely spread among educational stakeholders” (p. 70). Ogawa & Bossert, (2000) and Harris (2003) proposed that it was the hierarchical organizational structure, with its clearly defined roles and communication channels that prevented principals from sharing leadership with teachers.

Notwithstanding the reasons for the technical-rational approach to school leadership, it is clear that this approach contrasts significantly with the leadership required in professional learning communities. The new perspective of school leadership, one that supports the principles of professional learning communities, represents principals as “post-heroic leaders” (Louis & Kruse, 1995, p. 234) who share the responsibility for school effectiveness. Schools that embrace the PLC model no longer depend upon a hierarchy of roles based on competence and authority. In these schools, principals take on the role of co-learners who model and facilitate the practices of questioning, investigating and seeking solutions (Klein-Kracht, 1993; Harris, 2003). In professional learning communities, leadership becomes a shared process as principals recognize the potential of teacher collaboration and actively build leadership capacity on a school-wide level (Lambert, 2000). Sharing leadership and building leadership capacity, the foundations upon which professional learning communities are built, represent a very different perspective of organizational leadership from the technical-rational approach that currently exists in many schools.

Leadership in a Professional Learning Community

School leadership in a professional learning community is socially constructed and culturally sensitive (Foster & St. Hilaire, 2003; Harris, 2003). Leadership evolves as administrators and teachers collaborate, support each other’s growth, and redefine their systemic roles as professionals (Hoerr, 1996). As leadership shifts from an individual to an organizational capacity, the focus of structures and policies shifts from prescribing roles and well-defined role relationships to maintaining social legitimacy and acquiring the resources necessary to provide quality learning opportunities, not only for students but for teachers and administrators as well (Ogawa & Bossert, 2000).

How then does a school transform itself from a technical-rational organization into a professional learning community? To answer this question, we must first construct a view of leadership in a professional learning community. The key component is a principal who believes in the potential of a learning organization (Senge, 2002) and has the skills to build a community of collaborative learners. Molinaro and Drake (1998) posited that the construction of such a collaborative climate

required the support of a principal who rejected the notion of making decisions in isolation. They proposed that principals who wish to share leadership must replace ‘control over’ with ‘support for’ teachers and present them with opportunities to grow and develop (p. 6). To do this, the supportive principal provides autonomy over instructional practices, communicates trust, models inquiry, and shifts problem-solving responsibility to teachers. With autonomy and responsibility, however, comes a greater degree of teacher accountability, albeit a somewhat different kind than that found in hierarchal organizations. In keeping with the beliefs and values of a professional learning community, the approach to accountability shifts from a directive to a collaborative perspective. This shift is characterized by teacher performance appraisals that are developmental rather than evaluative (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001).

Leadership of a professional learning community requires that principals: a) accept and promote teacher competence by providing teachers with opportunities to lead, b) deviate from the hierarchical model in matters related to teaching and learning, and most importantly, c) maintain the school’s social legitimacy by focusing staff efforts on the improvement of student learning. To be successful, principal leadership must balance the hetrarchical approach of an adhocracy with the hierarchical approach of a bureaucracy (Beairsto, 1999). This means taking on the role of co-learner and collaborator in some matters and that of supervisor and school authority in others.

Having established that professional learning communities are a provincial strategy for school reform and having articulated the leadership patterns associated with a PLC, the next step is to examine how the styles of leadership used by practicing principals accord with the role of the principal in a PLC. This is, unfortunately, a step that is too often ignored by those who wish to transform school leadership and its omission belies the importance of leader behaviours in school reform.

Bridging the Gap, A Leadership Style Perspective

If schools are to be transformed into learning communities, foremost among the style-directed, principal behaviours is their capacity to collaborate (Fullan, 1995; O’Shea & O’Shea, 1997),

much of which is based on their decision-making practices. The importance of the alignment between actual and expected leadership styles in this regard has been highlighted in studies that show that principal's leadership style is the best discriminator between high participation and low participation by teachers (Taylor and Tashakkori, 1997; Huffman & Jacobson, 2003). As indicated earlier, simply defining leader behaviours for a learning community doesn't necessarily translate into successful school reform. Slater (2004, p. 13) proposed that collaborative leadership required a "change in the skills, knowledge, and behaviors" characteristic of a technical-rational organization. She further proposed that principals required not only

a new compendium of skills but they also need to adopt new 'mind-sets' or 'ways of being' that include coping with ambiguity, empowering others, and maintaining change momentum within an enhanced accountability context. (Slater, 2004, p. 14)

The question that many reformers fail to consider is whether or not these 'changes in behaviors' and 'revisions in mind-sets' are likely to occur. The literature on leadership styles (Fiedler & Chemers, 1974; Hershey & Blanchard, 1977; Reddin, 1970; Sergiovanni, 1991) provides some important clues. These leadership theorists argued that leadership style was a relatively fixed construct for an individual and that while some individuals may have the capacity to lead using more than one style, leadership style flexibility was not characteristic of all leaders. While Fiedler & Chemers (1974) and Hershey & Blanchard (1977) believed less in leaders capacity to vary their styles, Reddin (1970) and Sergiovanni (1991) proposed that under certain conditions individuals could adapt their leadership style to differing situations. While I will return to this important issue later in the paper, I turn now to an examination of the leadership styles of principals.

In their recent study, Huffman and Jacobson (2003) set out to determine the relationship between teachers' perceptions of their schools as professional learning communities and the leadership style of their principals. The subjects of the study were eighty-three prospective principals enrolled in an education administration course at a Texas university. Each subject identified their principal as having one of three possible leadership styles: a) directive, b) collaborative, or c)

non-directive. Participants in the study rated collaborative-style principals as more supportive of two key measures of professional learning communities: a) contribution – providing a safe environment for diverse ideas, beliefs and strategies, and b) conscience – being an organization guided by positive principles, ethics, and values.

The study described here draws on research on principals in New Brunswick (Williams, 1997) and uses decision-making as its measure of leadership style. As with the Huffman and Jacobson study, the collaborative style is only one of possible leadership approaches. In this study the collaborative style is labeled as the conceptual style. The directive style described by Huffman and Jacobson is expanded to include a directive and an analytical style. The non-directive style that Huffman & Jacobson described is a laissez-faire style that shares some characteristics with the behavioural style in this study. One important difference between the studies is the choice of subjects. Whereas the Texas study samples perceptions of aspiring administrators, this study examines the leadership styles of practicing principals from New Brunswick and in doing so represents the organizational context for the current reforms. As with the Huffman & Jacobson study, the importance of this study lies in the realization that all leaders are not alike. This is an essential point because the literature on school reform seldom considers the different leadership styles that principals bring to their positions.

Studying Leadership Styles for New Brunswick Principals

According to Bass (1990), “the definition used in a particular study of leadership depends upon the purpose of the study” (p. 19). The purpose of this study is to determine if principals are likely to use a collaborative leadership style and exhibit the associated decision making behaviours deemed essential in a professional learning community. The choice to categorize leadership styles based upon decision making is well established in the literature on leadership (Likert, 1977; Luthans & Lockwood, 1984; Mintzberg, 1989; Page, 1985; Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1958).

Background

This study sampled 166 out of 259 New Brunswick principals to determine their decision-making styles and to see if any patterns existed based on school type or gender. The choice of decision-making style instrument was based on an extensive review of the literature. The decision style inventory developed by Rowe (Rowe & Mason, 1987), unlike many, is founded on a well documented literature on leadership principles. Rowe based his leadership decision-making model on two sets of criteria: a) values orientation, and b) cognitive complexity. The first criteria, values orientation, is a concept derived from leadership studies in late 1950s (Halpin & Winer, 1957) and early 1960s (Blake & Mouton, 1964). These studies determined that eighty-three percent of the differences in leadership behaviour could be attributed to whether a leader's values were either task oriented (focused on the job) or people oriented (focused on the workers). The second criteria, cognitive complexity is a construct that Zaleznick (1970) used to describe the level of ambiguity leaders could tolerate when making decisions. Driver (1983) further developed cognitive complexity to include the amount of data leaders used to make their decisions and the number of alternative solutions they considered.

These two criteria, values orientation and cognitive complexity, combine to define the four decision-making styles measured by the decision style inventory. As shown in Figure 1, the inventory classifies principals based on four styles: a) directive – task oriented and low in cognitive complexity, b) behavioural – people oriented and low in cognitive complexity, c) analytical – task oriented and high in cognitive complexity, and d) conceptual – people oriented and high in cognitive complexity.

Figure 1. Rowe's Decision-making Style Grid

| | | VALUES ORIENTATION | |
|-------------------------|------|--------------------|-------------|
| | | Task | People |
| COGNITIVE COMPLEXITY | Low | Directive | Behavioural |
| | High | Analytical | Conceptual |

The power of Rowe's inventory lies in the fact that it provides for more than one decision-making style for each principal. It identifies a dominant style if one exists as well as a pattern of backup styles. The inventory also determines a style or styles that a principal would very seldom use. Therefore the inventory produces, for each principal, a pattern of decision-making styles consisting of: a) a dominant style, one that is used most often, b) backup styles, which are used when the dominant style is perceived as inappropriate, and c) least preferred styles, which would seldom be used. When combined with their propensity to use each of the four styles, Rowe's descriptions of each of the four decision-making styles provide some important insights as to why principals may feel differently about collaborative leadership.

Directive principals focus on technical decisions, are often autocratic, use little information when making decisions and consider few solutions. Speed and satisfactory results are most important to these principals. They generally prefer structure, are focused, often aggressive and efficient. The directive style is effective in hierarchical structures that maintain the status quo or when change is predictable.

Behavioural principals focus on social decisions, are supportive, and accept loose control. Their concern about the organization is on the development of the people. They generally prefer warmth, empathy, and open face-to-face communication. They counsel and persuade rather than direct, use limited data, maintain a short range focus, and avoid conflict. The behavioural style is more collegial than collaborative and its short range focus limits its use to making decisions that maintain the status quo or react to predictable change.

Analytical principals also focus on technical decisions and are often autocratic. They require much information and consider multiple solutions. Careful analysis and maximized achievement are most important to these principals. They require time to process information, are innovative and have a high need for control. The analytical style may be effective during periods of unpredictable change but it relies strongly on a hierarchical structure.

Conceptual principals also focus on social decisions and exhibit a people orientation. They are participative and share control. They tend to use data from multiple sources and consider many alternatives. Ethics and values are important to these individuals. They generally prefer loose control, trust and openness in relationships and share goals with subordinates. They maintain a long range focus, are achievement oriented and need recognition and independence. The conceptual style is collaborative and is effective in the highly ambiguous environment associated with unpredictable change.

How then, do the current demands on principal leadership fit with these decision-making styles? The shift toward improving learning rather than teaching and the expectation for principal collaboration associated with a professional learning community differ significantly from the status quo and contribute to a highly ambiguous environment in schools. Successful reform in this environment depends upon a shared leadership approach that runs counter to the hierarchical policies and procedures upon which directive and analytical principals depend. Likewise, the complexity associated with this reform exceeds behavioural principals' capacity to deal with the conflict and long-term challenges it will create. A review of the four decision-making styles used by principals clearly shows that only the conceptual style satisfies the additional leadership demands currently being placed on New Brunswick principals.

Findings by School Type

Before examining the patterns by school type, it is important to point out that the conceptual style required to facilitate professional learning communities was dominant in slightly less than one quarter of principals in the study. Approximately half of the principals indicated the conceptual style as a backup style. Therefore, almost three-quarters of the principals had a comfort level with the leadership style most aligned with professional learning communities. Equally important, some principals indicated the conceptual style as their least preferred style. These principals represent the greatest challenge for those who support the current reform. They are a group that will require a balance of pressure and support if they are to successfully adopt a conceptual approach to leading their schools. Interestingly, it appears that many of these principals may be located within one of the school types outlined below.

The examination of the findings by school type for the remainder of this section is an outgrowth of the school review reporting process. In addition to the concerns regarding school leadership and teaching and learning, the analysts also indicated ‘areas of concern by grade configuration’ (Morehouse and Tranquilla, 2005). In their opinion, principal leadership varied among schools that serve different grade levels. Therefore, the first three tables depict principal decision-making patterns based on the five most common types of schools. Table 1. shows the dominant decision-making style patterns for principals in each type of school. Forty-five percent of the partial elementary school (K-1 or K-3) principals exhibited a dominant behavioural style, while the dominant styles of principals of full elementary schools (K-5 or K-6) were more likely to be either analytical (27%) or conceptual (24%). Thirty-two percent of the principals of schools in which elementary/middle level grades were housed preferred the directive style.

Table 1. Percentage of Each Dominant Decision-Making Style by School Type

| School Type by Grade Level | Dominant Directive Style | Dominant Behavioural Style | Dominant Analytical Style | Dominant Conceptual Style | No Dominant Style | Sample Size (N) |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Partial Elementary | 10 | 45 | 10 | 20 | 15 | 20 |
| Elementary | 20 | 20 | 27 | 24 | 9 | 66 |
| Elementary/ Middle | 32 | 18 | 18 | 21 | 11 | 28 |
| Middle | 33 | 17 | 25 | 17 | 8 | 24 |
| Senior | 14 | 18 | 25 | 32 | 11 | 28 |
| Overall Totals | 22 | 22 | 23 | 23 | 10 | 166 |

The most common dominant styles for middle school principals were directive (33%) and analytical (25%). Decision-making styles for senior high principals tended to be more conceptual (32%) and analytical (25%). Further examination of the data provides two important patterns. First, the overall pattern of style dominance in schools was evenly distributed across the four styles. Second, a smaller percentage of principals in each type of school exhibited no dominant decision-making style. Principals in this ‘no dominant style’ group exhibited what Reddin and Sergiovanni characterized as high style flexibility and should be able to adopt a conceptual style if encouraged to do so.

Table 2. Percentage of Each Backup Decision-Making Style by School Type¹

| School Type by Grade Level | Backup Directive (%) | Backup Behavioural (%) | Backup Analytical (%) | Backup Conceptual (%) | Sample Size (N) |
|----------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| Partial Elementary | 70 | 45 | 50 | 35 | 20 |
| Elementary | 41 | 44 | 42 | 51 | 66 |
| Elementary/Middle | 36 | 61 | 43 | 50 | 28 |
| Middle | 46 | 38 | 58 | 38 | 24 |
| Senior | 43 | 43 | 54 | 43 | 28 |
| Overall Totals | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 166 |

¹ Note: Since each respondent could have as many as three backup styles, percentages in the table do not add to 100%.

Table 2 examines the backup styles principals used at each type of school. Interpretation of this table differs from that for dominant styles because while a principal had only one dominant style, he or she could have more than one backup style. The most commonly used backup style among principals of partial elementary schools was the directive style (70%). At full elementary schools there was a preference for a conceptual backup style (51%) while among elementary/middle school principals, the behavioural backup style appeared preferable (61%). Middle school principals preferred the analytical backup style (58%). Senior high principals showed a preference for an analytical backup style (54%) with equal preferences for each of the other three backup styles.

The patterns obtained by combining the dominant style and backup style data can be used to describe the leadership behaviours that principals exhibited as decision makers. Table 3. shows that partial elementary schools and elementary/middle schools tended to have principals who used directive and behavioural styles. Both of these leadership styles are low in cognitive complexity indicating that, while these principals may have balanced task and people orientations, they based their decisions on less information and considered fewer alternatives when making decisions. These principals tolerated less ambiguity and focused on short term results when making their decisions. Given adequate support and the collaborative nature of their behavioural style approach, these principals have a good chance of transforming their schools into professional learning communities.

Table 3. Decision-making Style Preferences Patterns

| School Type by Grade Level | Dominant Style | Preferred Backup Style |
|----------------------------|----------------|------------------------|
| Partial Elementary | Behavioural | Directive |
| Elementary | Analytical | Conceptual |
| Elem./Middle | Directive | Behavioural |
| Middle | Directive | Analytical |
| Senior | Conceptual | Analytical |

Principals in full elementary schools and high schools preferred a combination of analytical and conceptual decision-making styles. This pattern also indicates a balance between task and people orientations. The two styles in this pattern exhibit high cognitive complexity, an indication that these principals shared a greater tolerance for ambiguity and a tendency to use more information and consider more alternatives when making decisions. From a leadership style perspective these principals are most likely to succeed in implementing and sustaining professional learning communities.

The third pattern, a combination of directive and analytical styles was preferred by principals of middle schools. Principals who used this combination focused primarily on a task orientation with a balance between low and high cognitive complexity. This group of principals would be predominately hierarchical and would feel least comfortable adopting a collaborative leadership approach.

Findings by Gender

The analysis of the decision-making styles by gender shows that one commonly believed difference between males and females is reflected in principal decision-making styles. Table 4. shows that females were more likely to have dominant styles that are people oriented, while males were more likely to have task oriented styles. This pattern is most dramatic within the two styles that are low in cognitive complexity, where males were twice as likely as females to be directive-style dominant and females were almost twice as likely to be behavioural-style dominant.

Table 4. Percentage of each Dominant Decision-Making Style by Gender

| Style | Female | Male | Sample Size (N) |
|----------------|--------|------|-----------------|
| Directive | 12 | 25 | 36 |
| Behavioural | 32 | 18 | 36 |
| Analytical | 20 | 24 | 38 |
| Conceptual | 27 | 22 | 39 |
| No Dominant | 10 | 10 | 17 |
| Overall Totals | 25 | 75 | 166 |

The patterns for analytical and conceptual styles, those which exhibit high cognitive complexity, are far more balanced between genders. In the no-dominant-style category there was no difference between females and males.

Summary and Conclusion

This study examined four principal decision-making styles: a) directive, b) behavioural, c) analytical, and d) conceptual. While each of these styles can be effective if used in the proper situation, the current reform initiative favors the adoption of the conceptual style. Ten percent of the principals had no dominant style and therefore exhibited the capacity to use a conceptual style when it would be most appropriate. The conceptual style was the most preferred style for slightly less than one quarter of the principals (23%) in the study. Nearly another half of the principals (46%) reported the conceptual style as one of their backup styles. These principals were concentrated in full elementary schools (K-6), elementary/ middle schools (K-8), and high schools (9-12). Many principals in partial elementary schools (K-2 or 3) and combined elementary/middle schools preferred the behavioural style and if supported might become comfortable with a more conceptual approach. Principals from the only remaining school configuration, the middle schools, reported a preference for the directive/analytical leadership approach. This approach lacks the people orientation essential for effective collaboration between teachers and administrators and therefore presents the greatest challenge. Analysis by gender indicates that while females were more likely to accept a people oriented leadership approach, a substantial number of males favored this perspective as well. There was no difference between males and females regarding the preference for styles based on cognitive complexity.

Current school reform in New Brunswick is calling for higher achievement for all students. The strategies being adopted to reach this goal shift improvement efforts toward higher student learning and greater professional collaboration. This shift entails the transformation of schools from hierarchical organizations into professional learning communities. Unlike previous reforms, this transformation cannot be mandated because to do so would be to ignore the principles upon which professional learning communities are founded. Professional learning communities require a different form of leadership, one that mobilizes teacher participation and shares both decision making and accountability among educational stakeholders. This perspective of school leadership is coherent with the conceptual style proposed by Alan Rowe. Principals who adopt a conceptual decision-making style center their relationship with teachers on support rather than control. They are comfortable with ambiguity and share their decision-making authority. They build leadership capacity among their colleagues while maintaining a long term focus on student achievement.

The New Brunswick study cited in this paper shows principals' capacity to lead from a conceptual perspective. It shows that the majority of principals were open to a collaborative approach to leadership. Principal leadership, however, as measured by the school review process reflected a preference for the technical-rational approach. Why do principals persist in using a leadership style that fails to foster teacher collaboration? The reasons may stem from the fact that the current hierarchical system in education reinforces a directive, analytical approach. As Deming (Sagor & Barnett, 1994) so correctly stated, eighty-five percent of a person's performance is determined by the system in which they work. Principals are simply behaving in a manner that they perceive the system expects of them.

School leadership has its roots in a rational technical bureaucracy that relies heavily on hierarchical roles and relationships and this bureaucracy extends beyond the school into district offices and the ministry of education. The policies, procedures, roles, and relationships that pervade the provincial educational system appear to support a more directive leadership style. If collaborative leadership and the transformation of schools into professional learning communities are essential to achieving the quality learning agenda goals, then the entire system

needs to be reviewed and leadership behaviours at all levels must be re-examined. The revisions in mind sets that Slater (2004) called for can not be limited to school-based professionals alone. The new skills and behaviours she proposed must be apparent across the entire educational hierarchy. When leaders at all levels of the system take the steps necessary to balance the directive and collaborative approaches required to sustain professional learning communities the province will be on the right track to achieve the goals set out in the quality learning agenda.

Implications for School Reform

By articulating the quality learning agenda and developing a comprehensive strategy for its implementation, the first steps toward transforming schools into professional learning communities have been taken. The Department of Education has provided both the information and encouragement for districts and schools to move forward with this transformation. As pointed out in this paper, hesitancy among principals to adopt a collaborative leadership approach stems from two sources.

For the majority of principals who appear comfortable with the conceptual leadership style the hesitancy to adopt it may be a product of systemic forces that reinforce a more hierarchical approach. Senge (1990) argued that the best way to counter the effect of these forces is to examine the mental models that drive the educational bureaucracy. This is a process that must be spearheaded by the Department of Education and jointly undertaken with districts and schools and it should model the principles of the professional learning community that it strives to support. The department should also maintain its advocacy for PLCs by serving as a clearing house for successful district and school based innovations. The department's influence to encourage universities to offer courses that reinforce shared school leadership is also vital. Districts can support PLCs by: a) establishing ongoing professional development programs that build leadership capacity among both district and school personnel, b) working with district education councils to broaden support for PLCs, c) including expectations for collaborative leadership in school improvement plans, and d) screening applicants for administrative positions based on their capacity to lead schools collaboratively.

The second source of principal hesitancy is also style related. The collaborative leadership demands required for a PLC may run counter to some principals preferred decision-making styles. These principals would benefit from both formal and informal interactions with colleagues who have demonstrated success with collaborative leadership. Patience, persistence and support will be necessary for many of these principals and for some, career counseling may be the only remaining option.

This paper combines pertinent literature on school leadership and two studies on principal leadership styles. This information, combined with the strategies being taken by the province and results of the school review process, provides a cautiously optimistic view for successful school reform in New Brunswick. While important initial steps have been taken, for educational leaders who truly believe in the quality education agenda much work remains to be done.

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