Re-thinking ‘staff management’ in independent schools: An exploration of a human resource management approach

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This dissertation is presented for the degree of Doctor of Education

Murdoch University

School of Education

August 2007
DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own work except where stated to the contrary and that it is not substantially the same as any other dissertation that has previously been submitted for a degree at any other university.

_____________________________________
Susan Ann Roberts
Abstract

While the mission and ‘core business’ of schools has always been directed towards the education and pastoral support of the children, the staff who work to fulfil the mission and business have received less attention. With recent media reporting on anticipated teacher shortages, pedagogical issues and the quality of teaching the focus has shifted to the staff in schools. With evidence linking student achievements and academic outcomes to teacher impact, recruitment and retention have become significant issues, particularly in independent schools where parental expectations are high. Expertise in relation to human resource (HR) activities such as recruitment and retention, staff management and staff development, however, is not well developed in schools. This study therefore seeks to explore and understand staff management using a framework based on human resource management (HRM). It also examines the recent trend of appointing dedicated Human Resource (HR) practitioners to independent schools and the reasons behind these appointments.

A qualitative research approach was adopted in order to better understand the issues and reveal the complexity that surrounds them. In all, seven independent schools were purposely selected from urban Western Australia, and the principals, finance directors and HR practitioners from these schools were interviewed to gain their perspectives. The conceptual framework draws on the business-derived human resource management (HRM) and the HR activities within this domain. The analytical framework used was that of the ‘hard’/‘soft’ duality contained within HRM, which allowed tensions, such as that between ‘independent schools as businesses’ and independent schools as ‘communities with heart’, to be highlighted and examined.

The interviews revealed a broad understanding and knowledge by respondents of HR activities considered ‘necessary’ for the recruitment, and the day-to-day management of
staff, including remuneration, and to some extent, induction and performance
management systems. Most revealing in these schools was the lack of structure and
strategy in the implementation of the various HR activities and ways to work through
the hard/soft duality. By way of contrast, the HR practitioners appointed to five of the
independent schools had a broad based knowledge of all HR activities and were
attempting to ‘educate’ those in schools about HRM and what the function, collectively
applied, could do for them. They encountered entrenched attitudes and, in some schools,
resistance caused by misunderstandings associated with both the role and function.

The thesis concludes with implications and recommendations for independent school
leaders on the application of HRM in their schools. By re-thinking the paradigm of
staff management in this way, and through the adoption of a systematic and holistic
approach using the suite of HR activities, both hard and soft, the research points to the
potential for improvements in the quality of teaching staff recruited and retained, and
ultimately also in student outcomes.
Acknowledgements

Through my research journey of almost five years, I have had support and encouragement from a number of people. At the beginning of my journey were two supervisors: the warm and insightful Dr Lucy Jarzabkowski and the big picture thinker, Dr Judy MacCallum. When Lucy pursued a different career path and resigned as supervisor, I invited methodological expert Dr Peter Wright to continue the journey with me. While there have been many pauses and work distractions along the way, these three have ‘hung on’ and ‘hung in’ to guide my ideas and shape my writing.

To Associate Professor Helen Wildy who gave me my first experience in research, and my understandings about leadership, thank you. To Coral Pepper, my colleague, who became my friend I express my deepest gratitude for the many coffees and opportunities to share and compare. With both of these women I continue to travel, both metaphorically and literally, internationally to present papers at conferences. At various times during my journey I have also had the pleasure of chewing over ideas and concepts with Kathleen Baldwin, Dr Kathryn Choules, Michael Snadden and Dr Madeline Burgess. While we no longer share an office or even a University, my memories of our conversations remain. To Angelina Chilino in ERAP and Julia Hobson who inspired with her helpful and grounded post graduate presentations, thank you.

And, finally to my family …. my husband, Erwin who has a demanding job but nevertheless took over some domestics; to my son Michael and my daughter Anna, I apologise for being there in body, but often not in spirit. Thank you for your understanding and support, especially during these past months. This experience really has been a life changing journey!
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