4. TEACHER INVOLVEMENT IN AUSTRALIA

“Teachers Have Much to Offer”

INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with a brief description of the Australian school system as represented in Tasmania. This provides a backdrop for a report of the design and results of the Australian component of this study. Results of the research conducted with 50 principals and 105 teachers about their respective views on teacher involvement in school-based decision-making are presented and discussed with reference to our knowledge of schooling cultures and the workloads and worklives of educators in Australia.

The Tasmanian School System

The compulsory schooling sector in Tasmania runs from the Preparatory Year to when a student becomes 18 years old. The final two years of secondary schooling in the government sector (Years 11 and 12) are offered in separate institutions called Senior Colleges. The Tasmanian Education Department has introduced new curriculum, teaching practices, and assessment approaches almost continuously for the past few decades. For example, in 2006 the second round of changes to the curriculum this decade was implemented, and a major re-structuring and curriculum initiative recently has been discontinued (2010) in favor of a return to a model that existed in the late 1990s. Likewise the Department is committed to supplying what it sees as appropriate educational provisions for the post-compulsory sector. Accordingly, a consultative process and the development of reports and guidelines for curriculum change along with teaching practices and student assessment is occurring. One noticeable trend has been the push to offer more vocationally oriented curricula in this post-compulsory sector.

Class sizes are a contentious issue in Tasmania. While the most recent Annual Report published by the Department of Education Tasmania (2009) shows the average class size as 23.8 in primary schools and 23.3 in secondary schools, in reality student numbers in the high 20s are not uncommon. The teachers’ union has conducted several campaigns in favor of reduced class sizes.

During the past quarter century, Tasmania, like the other Australian States and Territories, has been required to address concerns of increased productivity as a
result of financial stringencies and a perceived lack of international competitiveness. Over this period, there have been widespread concerns for responsiveness to these new circumstances and for quality in educational outcomes. The 1990s were characterized by an ever-increasing flow of statements and policies regarding new priorities for, and consequent expectations of teachers and schools (Gardner & Williamson, 2005; Poppleton & Williamson, 2004).

In the Tasmanian government school system teacher transfers are relatively common compared with systems where teacher employment is locally managed, as in independent schools in Tasmania, school districts in North America, and Local Education Authorities in the UK. Tasmanian government school teachers may only request a transfer after a set period of time (3 to 4 years) except in the case of compassionate grounds. In addition, after six years of service in any school, or because of staffing needs in their current school/college or another school/college, a teacher may have to take a ‘required’ transfer no more than 65 kilometers from their place of residence.

The Role of the Tasmanian School Principal

The past three decades has seen a number of changes in the role of the principal (Mulford, Silins & Leithwood, 2004). As a result, principals are expected to demonstrate ‘transformative’ leadership that fosters the commitment and capacities of school community members. For the curriculum, pedagogical and other changes described above, the school principal is viewed as having a key role in the successful implementation of the innovation within their school. These articulated changes in principal work and responsibilities, however, differ from reality: Tasmanian Government School principals report increasing conflict between their work and the educational leadership and management expectations of the state government bureaucracy (Gardner & Williamson, 2004). In addition, the educational bureaucracy has undergone major restructuring on three occasions in the past two decades, and nearly double this number of changes in curriculum requirements have been initiated outside of the school setting. Until recently, school leadership was typically hierarchical and dominantly male in schools that enroll secondary students.

However, it is also true that Government school principals (who form the majority of principals in the present study) while being members of a Principals’ Association typically also belong to the same union as teachers and come to the principalship via a path of teaching. Thus many principals have considerable teaching experience and view teachers as their colleagues.

This is particularly important in view of recent international and Australian research that has shown that when principals foster openness and social trust with teachers as colleagues, teacher capacity to implement change and act proactively is strengthened (Geist & Hoy, 2004; Hallam & Hausman, 2009; Mulford & Johns, 2004; Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Likewise, it is known that trust develops between principals and teachers when the school principal’s beliefs and actions are consistent with stated school goals, when principals prefer teachers’ inclusion on a consistent