UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

BECOMING A TEACHER LEADER: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is the outcome of a doctoral research project that involved analysis of the development of teacher leadership in a cohort of 21 experienced teachers who undertook facilitation roles in a school change program known as IDEAS (Innovative Designs for Enhancing Achievement in Schools).

The aim of the study was twofold; to develop a deep understanding of the teachers’ growth as leaders and to uncover their personal perspectives on their growth and development as leaders as a consequence of their 2-4 years engagement as IDEAS Facilitators. Through the use of a qualitative research approach, and employment of orthodox grounded theory in particular, the study sought to illuminate the manner in which the participants resolved their main concern (Glaser, 1978). Consistent with the expressed purpose of grounded theory of generating substantive theory, the thesis has developed a new construct for consideration in teachers’ professional development: Becoming a Teacher Leader.

The Becoming a Teacher Leader substantive theory which has been developed is presented as a Basic Social Psychological Process (Glaser, 1978), comprising five phases (or sub-core categories). It presumes to deepen the understanding of the manner in which the 21 teachers, who were experienced but did not initially think of themselves as leaders, developed recognised leadership skills and generated active personal constructions of themselves as teacher leaders. In doing so, the substantive theory that has been developed establishes the interrelatedness of three core concepts: Learning, Leading and Safety. The theory
makes explicit the centrality of safety as a necessary ingredient for the development of teacher leadership.

The core category, or dominant theme, that pervades the experiences of the 21 teacher leaders is presented as *Experiencing Learning and Leading in a Safe Environment*. It connects the five sub-core categories that emerged from the data analysis as resolving the main concern of the participants. The five sub-core categories are: *Sizing Up; Preparing to Commit; Becoming Ready; Experiencing Learning and Leading* and *Enhancing Capacities*. Each sub-core category is individually detailed in Chapters 4-8.

The substantive theory that is presented in this thesis asserts that the 21 experienced teachers who comprised the sample were in a state of readiness to exercise educational leadership when they undertook their IDEAS facilitation work. They then sought throughout their engagement with IDEAS to *Experience Learning and Leading in a Safe Environment*. Additionally, the theory asserts that, when the teachers were provided with opportunities to participate in extended periods of learning and leading in safe environments, they were enabled to develop knowledge and skills typically associated with the construct of teacher leadership. The particular knowledge and skills base that was developed by the participants was shaped by an approach to school-based leadership, known as parallel leadership (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson and Hann, 2002, 2009) and incorporated into the IDEAS program. The substantive theory also maintains that, as a consequence of *Experiencing Learning and Leading in a Safe Environment*, the participants were not only able to
develop the confidence to lead, but also to construct images of themselves as teacher leaders, thereby becoming teacher leaders in both practice and perception.

This study presumes to contribute to the extant literature in two ways. First, the study has extended understanding of the concept of safety as an environmental factor which enhances the development of teacher leadership. Second, it has provided a career development perspective on teacher leadership. The through the eyes of the participants approach of the study represents an alternative to the dominant positivistic, normative paradigm most commonly associated with research into teacher leadership. Thus, through participant-based exploration of the core category of Experiencing Leading and Learning in a Safe Environment, the research enabled the identification of three interrelated concepts - leading, learning and safety, which are deemed to be essential to the process of teacher leadership development.

The substantive theory that has emerged from this research should prove useful to the teachers and principals in the many schools which are currently using the IDEAS program as a model for school revitalisation. More broadly, it should also be useful to experienced teachers who wish to deepen their understandings of teacher leadership development. For principals who wish to nurture the development of teacher leaders, the study makes explicit the nature of their roles in establishing and maintaining environments which are safe places, in which prospective teacher leaders can experience learning and leading.
CERTIFICATION OF DISSERTATION

I certify that the ideas, results, analyses and conclusions reported in this folio are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

__________________________    __________________
Signature of Candidate     Date

ENDORSEMENT

__________________________    __________________
Signature of Supervisor     Date

__________________________    __________________
Signature of Supervisor     Date
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I would like to thank the many people who have shared this journey with me. As I sat to write this I realised however, that this journey began even before I enrolled as a PhD student. My mother instilled in me a love of learning, my father showed me the importance of persistence and my wonderful brother taught me about friendship and love. I needed all of these to get to the starting point of this journey.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CERTIFICATION OF DISSERTATION</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1-INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Background</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Why Adopt a Grounded Approach?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 The Aim, Methodology and Emergent Research Problem</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Assumptions that Underpin this Research</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 The Significance of the Study</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7 Scope of the Study</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8 Structure of the Thesis</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2-RESEARCH DESIGN</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Introduction</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Selecting a Research Design</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Ontology and Epistemology</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Selection of a Research Paradigm</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Symbolic Interactionism, Constructivism, Constructionism and Grounded Theory</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 The Methodology of Grounded Theory</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6.1 Purpose of Grounded Theory</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6.2 Commencing Grounded Theory</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6.3 The Literature Comparison</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7 Data Collection</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7.1 Methods</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7.2 Participants, Participant Selection, Purposive Sampling and Theoretical Sampling</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8 Analysing the Data</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8.1 Coding the Data</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8.2 Constant Comparison</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Section</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1</td>
<td>Validating the Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2</td>
<td>Evaluating Past Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Determining the Potential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.1</td>
<td>Rationalising the Reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.2</td>
<td>Imagining Possible Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Assessing School Readiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Gaining Collective Consensus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Endorsing Leadership Potential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Ensuring Principal Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Imagining Oneself as Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Becoming Aware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.1</td>
<td>Realising One’s Unmet Professional Needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.2</td>
<td>Identifying the Need to Engage in Whole School Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.3</td>
<td>Comparing One’s Self to Peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Searching For</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.1</td>
<td>Professional Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.2</td>
<td>Opportunities to Lead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.3</td>
<td>Searching for Safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.4</td>
<td>Feelings of Ownership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.5</td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>Summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Establishing a Growth Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Adopting Protocols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Ensuring Principal Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5.1</td>
<td>The Learning Experiences are Supportive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10.2 Achievement of the Purpose and Aims of the Research ............................................. 306
10.3 Significance of the Thesis .................................................................................................... 307
10.4 Implications for Practitioners ............................................................................................ 309
10.5 Implications for Further Research .................................................................................... 311
10.6 Comebacks .......................................................................................................................... 313
10.7 Elevation to Formal Theory ............................................................................................... 314
10.8 Criteria for Evaluation of a Grounded Theory Research Study ........................................ 315
    10.8.1 Fit .................................................................................................................................. 317
    10.8.2 Relevance ..................................................................................................................... 318
    10.8.3 Workability ................................................................................................................... 319
    10.8.4 Modifiability ................................................................................................................ 319
10.9 Some Personal Reflections .................................................................................................. 320
References ................................................................................................................................... 343

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Ethics Clearance ................................................................................................. 322
APPENDIX B: Approval to Undertake Research in Victoria .................................................. 323
APPENDIX C: Approval to Undertake Research in Western Australia ...................................... 325
APPENDIX D: Application to Conduct Research in Victorian Schools ................................. 326
APPENDIX E: Informed Consent Form .................................................................................... 334
APPENDIX F: Professional Conversation ............................................................................... 337
LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 2.1: Characteristics of Participants ............................................................................. 50

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 2.1: A scheme for analysing assumptions about the nature of social science ........ 24
FIGURE 2.2: Dominant Paradigms and Domains in the Social Sciences. ......................... 27
FIGURE 2.3: The Grounded Theory Process vs the Traditional Process............................ 37
FIGURE 2.4: The Concept Indicator Model ....................................................................... 57
FIGURE 2.5: The Relationship between Categories and Properties in Orthodox Grounded Theory ......................................................................................................................... 63
FIGURE 3.1: Experiencing Learning and Leading in a Safe Environment: A grounded theory of ‘Becoming a teacher leader’ in IDEAS schools......................................................... 100
FIGURE 3.2: Experiencing Learning and Leading in a Safe Environment: A Grounded Theory of ‘Becoming a Teacher Leader’ in IDEAS Schools................................................................. 127
FIGURE 4.1: Sizing-up ........................................................................................................... 134
FIGURE 5.1: Preparing to Commit ....................................................................................... 153
FIGURE 6.1: Becoming Ready ........................................................................................... 172
FIGURE 7.1: Experiencing Learning and Leading ............................................................... 198
FIGURE 8.1: Enhancing Capacities .................................................................................... 227
FIGURE 9.1: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs ....................................................................... 255
FIGURE 9.2: A Hierarchy of Work Motivation .................................................................. 257