

## SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

# Deep Work: Sunk on the treacherous shoals of time control in tough schools

Cal Newport's concept of Deep Work was a best seller, and it developed a big following in the business world. As a result, the authors of this action research project focused on whether this concept would fit our schools, and if the perceptions and actions that school leaders, including teacher leaders developed while engaging in activities would promote deep learning, and consequentially influence their leadership effectiveness. The findings indicated that while the concept itself is noble, and certainly worthy of emulating within a school's context. In tough school communities however, participants reported that their ability to engage in Deep Work was very much influenced by the dynamics of the school day, and, not surprisingly, the place and time at which the Deep Work activities were undertaken. All participants believed that developing a culture that promoted Deep Work should be the top priority of every leadership group in their efforts to improve a school's teaching and learning community. However, the day-to-day survival mode activities that all school leaders experienced prevented a full implementation of Newport's Deep Work model. The impact of these findings should be further explored because they shine a light on the traditional structures and cultures of Australian schools.

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Sufficient time needs to be devoted to achieve Deep Work

## Introduction

The world of school leadership is dominated by the thousands of micro exchanges that principals have with staff, students, parents and district administrators each week. Harry Wolcott (1973) in the late 1960s conducted a ground-breaking ethnography of a principal (Ed Bell) at Taft Elementary School located in Oregon, United States. The break-through discovery for Wolcott was the nature of the principal's encounters during a typical school day. Wolcott (1973) observed:

*'The greatest part of a principal's time is spent in an almost endless series of encounters from the moment he arrives at school until the moment he leaves. Most of these encounters are face-to-face tending to keep the principalship a highly personal role.'* (p. 88).

In a time and motion study of the principal's average day Wolcott noted that the principal said he was out "eight

nights a week” but his day was very interesting, as was his time spent with others. Deep work is pushed aside in Ed Bell’s day, even though he had more “alone time” than we see in our schools today.

Table 1: Wolcott’s description of a principal’s day. (Wolcott, 1973, p. 91)

Task	Observed range (%)	Percent of time in an average day
<i>Time spent alone.</i>		
Portion of total day spent alone	20-38%	24%
<i>Time spent with others</i>		
Portion of total day spent with others without verbal interaction (previewing material, supervising children on the playground.	5-7%	6%
Portion of the total day spent listening to others.	28-39%	35%
Portion of the total day spent talking to others:	23-27%	25%
Giving information		
Asking questions	4-8%	7%
...Giving direction	2-5%	4%
Total talking time = 36%		
TOTAL		101%

In the 1990s, as a direct consequence of the New Public Management reforms implemented across all Australian states, principals were required to assume sole responsibility for the school’s operations. Unlike the procedures to prevent failure that existed in centrally controlled school systems, school leaders’ reputations rose or fell according to the decisions they made. This model of school leadership required a different set of skills and knowledge. For those school leaders already holding substantive positions this change required re-learning their roles and it seemed that their Deep Work capacity was swamped by the urgent crises that constantly afflict school principals who are exposed to these reactive pressures.

The fall-out of these changes for school leadership are multi-levelled changes in their roles. However, the major worry is that school principals, particularly primary school principals, are being diverted from the strategic, “big picture” aspects of school leadership into reactive, low-level, disputative problem solving. Sadly, this perceived reality was reflected in the case of every participant’s school environment. This is not to say that school leaders did not attempt to engage in these higher-level activities. Indeed, each participant worked hard to alter the way in which they examined their roles within the school’s teaching and learning community in an effort to engage in more Deep Work. However, given the dynamic nature of school environments, regardless of the context, the unpredictability of the school’s day continually exerted forces that were counterproductive to the intent of Deep Work.

### Deep Work

For the purpose of this article the following definitions have been applied:

Deep Work is defined as “Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate.” (Newport, 2106, p. 3)

Management will be considered to include the organisational elements of the school that are directed towards maintaining the status quo, rather than facilitating change. Management frequently exhibits leadership qualities; however, its overall purpose is maintenance (Bush, 2007). Leadership is associated with influencing the actions of others in evoking change. Leadership is concerned with individuals shaping the motivations, actions and goals of others; with the overall purpose of engendering change and development.

### **The study**

In attempting to examine participants' responses in undertaking a Deep Work experience, within a school context, three processes were undertaken. In the first instance participants wrote about their perceptions of their current roles addressing the following topics: Reactive-strategic mix; conflict resolution and the nature of the school population; teaching/non-teaching roles; levels of administrative duties and leadership; and, what would you change to be able to get your job done better?

In the second stage, meetings were conducted with participants, to identify strategic tasks that the school community needed to address over a term to better place the school in improving learning for students. During this stage mutual agreement of what Deep Work would mean for the participants was established.

While in the final stage participants wrote about their experiences of Deep Work addressing the same topics as identified in stage one: Reactive-strategic mix; conflict resolution and the nature of the school population; teaching/non-teaching roles; levels of administrative duties and leadership; and, did the change allow them to get their job done better?

### **Participants**

Staff who were directly involved in this study included three principals, an associate principal, two deputy principals, a senior phase leader (Years 5-6), one middle phase leader (Year 3-4) and a junior phase leader (Years K-2). This group was drawn from 4 schools, all in primary settings, that had Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) rankings of 900 (School A, 162 students); 984, (School B, 472 students); 1001, (School C, 265 students); and 1049, (School D, 500 students). While each school's context was different, the leaders had previously demonstrated their ability to build highly collaborative school communities.

### **Results**

Although this case study was undertaken on a very small scale across four school sites; Three in the North Metropolitan Region and one in the South Metropolitan Region, and all in a primary K-6 setting. The results and feedback all indicated strong similarities across the sites.

Qualitative and quantitative data was collected and analysed in relation to respondents' answers regarding the beliefs about the nature of leadership work in their school at the present time; and secondly, about their experiences in and as a result of undertaking a Deep Work experience, within their school context. A short survey based on activities undertaken providing the quantitative data, while open-ended questions and phone discussions provided the qualitative data. Three limiting factors in this action research were:

- The small sample size,
- The variation in school size and setting and
- The time frame over which the research was conducted.

In an interview with one school leader, she stated that, “the reflection process was a worthwhile process and something that the school should continue to refine, but the time period over which we were involved was far too short.” This sentiment was repeated in various forms by all participants, yet another school leader declared that “the reflection process during the study, while being worthwhile, only highlighted to me the amount of good will that exists within leaders at my school at all levels, in terms of the time they freely give of themselves to build our capacity as a learning community.” While we found this statement quite frank, we realised that for many of the leaders, particularly the younger less experienced ones, this time invested represented one of the few ways in

which they could engage in proactive, high level, conversations beyond the day to day reactive processes that occupy a school community's time.

In reflective discussions with deputy principals, one noted that, while “the concept of Deep Work appeared, on the surface, to be worthwhile and required, ‘Quarantining’ time on the school site during the day was proving a little more difficult as the unpredictability of the day was problematic.” This highlighted the necessity for the group to move off site and have someone cover their roles for the time they were off the site. In sharing this discussion with other school leaders, their ability to do this was influenced by both availability of funds and locating suitable relief. Barth (2006) believed that collegial relationships were about key players in schools working together to achieve higher levels of achievement, and this discussion certainly drove that belief home to us.

Data from the survey indicated that over the study period, the leaders felt they had moved from sometimes, and rather serendipitously, engaging in Deep Work. To becoming highly attuned to how very little time they actually spent engaged in Deep Work and, in doing so, not providing their aspiring leaders with opportunities that would develop them into proactive leaders rather than reactive leaders. In an interview with a principal from the lowest ICSEA school, he stated, “I feel I have inherited challenges in my leadership role from previous administration teams, where open discussions were not encouraged. Because of this my middle leaders are finding it difficult in making the shift from a compliancy model to a reflective model in terms of Deep Work and what is required within this construct. They are used to a model where they followed rather than led, and this process has opened the door to them for not only identifying areas of weakness within the school, but assembling their own team to problem solve and move forward”.

From our perspective, this was not indicative of a collaborative culture, thereby indicating that the creation of a collaborative professional learning community where leadership at all levels is encouraged. However, in defence of the former leadership groups, it could be argued that this culture had come into existence within a battle-hardened environment and, as such, was a product of circumstances and what they saw as a successful way to operate (MacNeill & Boyd, 2020). This same principal added, “... it will require deeper reflection on my behalf as to what actions will move the staff forward as a collaborative entity focused on a unified goal of increasing student achievement.”

School A: 162 Students	Management	Management & Leadership	Leadership	Unallocated
	33%	44%	7%	16%

School C: 265 Students	Management	Management & Leadership	Leadership	Unallocated
	53%	36%	7%	4%

The two tables above represent the percentage of a school day that two participating school principals identified as accounting for their times spent at school. The school day was established as a 7-hour day, representing 420 minutes. The domains fell into four categories:

- Management
- Management and Leadership
- Leadership, and
- Unallocated

Not surprisingly, as the student numbers increase, so too does the time allocated to school management. This additional allocation of time appears, and certainly in the two examples above, to be drawn from the domain of Management and Leadership. When this is compared to the data drawn from an associate principal (School D) this variation is highlighted even further.

School D: 500 Students	Management	Management & Leadership	Leadership	Unallocated
	73%	19%	5%	-3%

While this data, in terms of the percentage of the day being allocated to leadership and Leadership and Management, may offer a glimmer of hope for higher level Deep Work taking place in this school. The reality could not be further from the truth. The categories that were established as Management and Leadership included:

- Talking to staff under 4 minutes
- Talking with staff for more than half an hour
- Managing High School Transitions
- Timetabling (DOTT)
- One-line budget.

While the Leadership domain included the following categories:

- Reviewing school foci
- Reviewing instructional frameworks
- Informal classroom visits
- Analysing data to identify curriculum shortfalls
- Strategic planning
- Developing middle leaders.

As can be seen in the above lists, the majority of the deep work falls into, as would be expected, the Leadership domain. In the case of School D, the associate principal has a negative 3% of her time in the unallocated category. This was simply because the time that she invested went beyond the 420-minute allocation for the day. In the case of the other two tables, these principals noted their out of hours work as additional comments. Further to this, this percentage of the day actually represents, on average, 26 minutes of the day that was being allocated to deep work.

School B: 472 Students	Management	Management & Leadership	Leadership	Unallocated
	72%	14%	9%	5%

The data drawn from the principal of School B illustrated remarkable similarities to the associate principal of a similar sized school. While the contexts are very different the time invested into each domain was similar in time allocation. This principal, as with those of School A and C, also allocated time outside of the school day to engage in activities that would be deemed as deep work.

The purpose of this study was to carry out action research to determine the viability of embedding Cal Newport's concept of Deep Work within a school context and the effective that this has on developing strategic thinking within a school's teaching and learning community. While it is too early to accurately measure the effect these actions have had on student achievement and this is unquestionably an area that will demand further exploration in later months, there certainly appears to be some impact on the leader's efficacy within this space. Participants undoubtedly perceived that opportunities to reflect on strategic planning to be important and worthwhile and also, on the whole, seemed to welcome the opportunity attempt to embed the practice.

Another significant aspect is the need to ensure that school structures not only allow, but encourage, these reflective practices. Only through this, can it be assured that leaders at all levels will be able to engage in such professional growth opportunities, devoid of the usual pressures of the day to day unpredictability of the school environment. Nonetheless, time must be allocated to facilitate leadership collaboration for Deep Work to be an ongoing professional and organizational growth strategy. Only in this way can we begin to see a shift in the way that leaders think and act. Sadly, the current model of leadership development means that new and aspirant leaders base their understanding of leadership on what they have been immersed in.

If they learn their craft within a reactive culture, then this will be the foundation on which they mold their own developmental understanding of leadership.

### Conclusions

This research draws attention to the problematic situations for middle management in small schools, in tough communities, where the structural situation requires a “all hands on deck” approach when the schools are operating. MacNeill and Cavanagh (2013) showed that in tough schools the principals existing in similar circumstances never experienced the joy of what Csikszentmihalyi called “Flow”. A real concern for schools and systems then becomes how to rest and re-vitalize these staff members who are constantly on alert, living in a reactive mode.

As a result of this action research, more questions have been created than were answered, however one fact remains: If education systems wish to grow and move forward as innovative organisations they must begin to construct and renew themselves within a paradigm that promotes Deep Work as the way forward, and provide conduits that enable leadership groups to get away from the reactive and, unpredictable chaotic environments in schools. These reactive environments are not conducive to encouraging and developing strategic thinking that supports the establishment of a collective efficacy which enables school leadership teams to bring about successful school improvement through quality implementation.

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