

Book Review

Mary Nall, a retired principal, reviews Paul Shaw's *Taking Charge* and finds many attributes that make the book both practical and thought-provoking.

Shaw, Paul L. (2011)

Taking Charge:

Leading with passion and purpose in the principalship

New York. Teachers College Press

228 pp

This is a powerful book and one that I wish I had had access to in my years as a principal (and in the years leading up to this position).

Drawing on the author's experience, which includes being a principal of four schools, a projects co-ordinator, an international consultant in educational leadership and a university professor, Paul Shaw has produced an insightful, passionate, yet easy-to-read guide to strategic actions for principals. The guide is based on four pillars of improvement and the two important foundations on which they rest. The foundations are having a morally compelling purpose and the enactment of a participatory workplace culture. The pillars are:

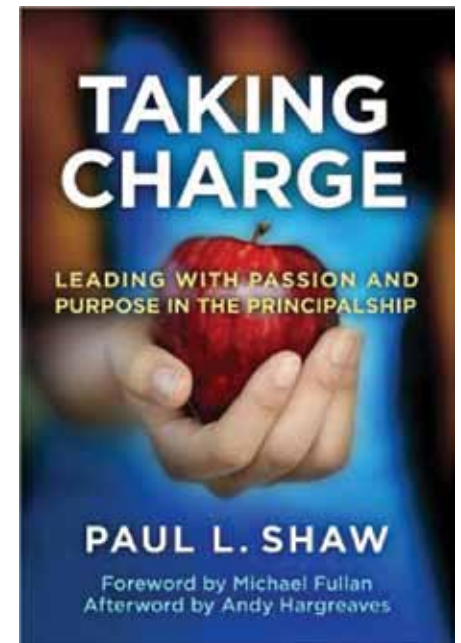
- Knowing your students well;
- Strong inclusive professional relationships;
- Continuous development of intellectual capital; and,
- Powerful and cohesive pedagogical responsiveness in teaching across all classrooms.

Shaw acknowledges the obstacles that are ever-present in a principal's life – contracts, policies, timetables,



roles and responsibilities, traditions, workplace culture, public acceptance, resources etc. He describes practical ways of responding to current points of tension in schools, while being grounded in practice and supported by research. He argues for strong, purposeful and participatory leadership that transcends restraints and seizes opportunities to improve life opportunities for students.

While underlining the role of the principal as a curriculum leader Shaw allows that the principal may not be “the resident expert” on all aspects of curriculum but can “take charge” by being a “curious collaborator and participant” in a rigorous and robust dialogue with teacher colleagues on how pupils learn and are learning. With B.C. facing another review of Provincial curriculum the strategies that Shaw provides in Chapter 2 are timely.

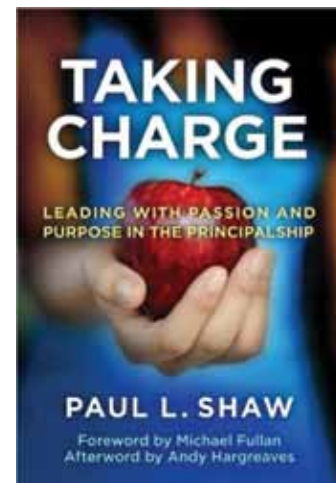
There are many attributes that make *Taking Charge* a practical and useful book for new and experienced principals alike. The case studies of schools provide elaborate accounts and practical ideas of what can be done, and what has been achieved in schools in building a morally compelling purpose and a participa-



tory workplace culture. The lay-out of the text with reflective questions and suggestions for further reading after each chapter make this a valuable book for discussion and study groups.

With a foreword by Michael Fullan who encourages the reader “to delve into this book and be rewarded. It will help you to think more deeply and act more confidently as a principal,” and an afterword by Andy Hargreaves who testifies that Paul Shaw “epitomizes the four pillars of leadership consistently in his own practice” and “has an unswerving moral commitment to all students and to the idea and ideal of teaching as a profession requiring long training and hard reflection ...” Shaw's work is indeed strongly endorsed.  

Book Excerpt



In Chapter 5, *Capacity Building: The Promise of Professional Learning Communities*, Paul Shaw shares his work with teachers and students to address issues that arise when a school has a high incidence of students who are new to the English language, live in poverty and are single parented.

This chapter seeks to make more explicit the complexity of how teachers work together in order to learn together — building capacity for all to incessantly improve. In Chapter 5 you will learn about:

- The experiences of teachers as they engage in sustained ongoing dialogue about the documented learning experiences of their students
- Fundamental principles that underpin the work of a robust learning community
- Specific strategies to enable teachers to inquire and learn together
- Six core capacities that need to be developed in the successful school
- Detailed plans of action and roles that leaders can deploy in building school-wide capacity

When I then was appointed principal at Southern Cross Public School, I was determined to create a structure embedded in the day to day

work of the school that would permit the development of an informed continuous discourse among teachers about student learning. My purpose in attempting to do this was to build into teachers and my own day to day work a means of constantly gathering information about student learning so we could improve our appreciation of student experience and our classroom teaching. It was to be about collective knowledge building. I envisioned deep, ongoing conversations involving all my new colleagues about teaching and learning, leading to a coherent, consistent and rich experience for the youngsters at Southern Cross, a low socioeconomic, high immigrant, multi-cultural, multi-lingual community.

Case Study

Southern Cross Public School

The learning community my teacher colleagues and I created at Southern Cross Public School illustrates many of the key principles described at the end of this chapter. We jointly gathered information and developed through consensus a morally compelling purpose around

which all could commit. Collectively, we designed an infrastructure for inquiry and knowledge building. We learned to participate vigorously through dialogue, inquiry and shared classroom practice as we sought to build personal, collective, and organizational capacity in order to improve the life chances of our pupils. At the time, we called the more formal process and structure *Professional Growth*, but more recently I have come to call it *Continuous After Learning Review (CALR)*. Southern Cross was a needy school of approximately 530 pupils in Grades K-6. Substantial numbers of new non-English speaking immigrant students, a sizable portion of the population living below the poverty level, high crime rate in the neighborhood, and a significant portion of families receiving government assistance and parented by a single parent meant that many youngsters came to school ill-prepared to learn.

In the months prior to my actual appointment, I visited classrooms, met several times with the entire teaching staff and facilitated a process of identifying student needs.

From this data rich process I was able to forge a consensus with my colleagues around “literacy learning for all” as the core purpose of our future work together. This gave me the summer to plan how to move strategically to enact this compelling purpose.

Strategic Actions Taken During the First 15 Months


On returning from summer vacation, I provided an individualized reading for teachers with a personal note asking them to respond and to share the article with colleagues. I saw this as the first step towards creating a “reading” culture within the school. Professional learning cultures are also reading cultures!

Having established the professional growth design team of six teachers plus myself the previous June, we initiated the first *Continuous After Learning Review* session during the first week of school. Each session involved every teacher for a two-hour dialogue about student writing. As I describe in detail later in this chapter, during this first session each teacher was asked to read a short professional article about student writing development and bring a sample of student writing to speak about with colleagues. As anticipated more questions were raised than answered. However the first blush of an ongoing dialogue and inquiry was created. The example of Andreas used to open this chapter provides the reader with a feeling for how these sessions unfolded as time progressed.

During this first year together teaching colleagues and I were able to utilize 30 to 40 hours of instructional time for each teacher, i.e. approximately one third of the 100 hours we planned to provide for these professional growth provoking sessions. The remaining time came from meeting times, professional activity days and

from teacher’s personal time.

During the first 15 months many strategic directions were moved to action. These directions were driven by the overarching purpose of improving literacy for all and were inter-related. Together they changed our structure, culture, and

use of time in ways that increased our organization’s capacity to respond collectively, effectively, and in an informed way to the varied needs of our diverse population. 

For more about Paul Shaw’s work visit his website: www.paulshaw.ca

(Among) the actions (many more are included in the book) my staff and I took at Southern Cross were strategic in that they actively furthered the agreed upon purposes of the school, complemented one another by adding value that was greater than the single action and transformed the learning culture of the school. All classroom teaching moved towards enabling pupils to explore, inquire, demonstrate and apply their knowledge about topics of substance and depth.

- All pupils engaged in personal reading and writing on a daily basis. They maintained personal reading logs and writing folders. In-classroom libraries were established.
- Team teaching was actively encouraged and supported. The timetable was structured to enable cross-grade teams of teachers to meet and plan together.
- Teachers actively engaged with and were responsive to the linguistic, cultural and socially diverse needs of the pupils. In fact diversity became an extraordinary resource.
- There was an active process to engage and inform parents of program developments as they emerged. Often, we repeated for parents (with some modification because of time) sessions and our findings emerging out of the continuous after learning review.
- Decision-making was shared, and for significant tasks (e.g. developing school purposes, designing the professional growth process (CALR), allocating budget and other resources) all stakeholders were involved in finding consensus.
- Teachers were supported to take on leadership roles.
- University of Toronto and York University placed pre-service teacher candidates in the classrooms for extended periods. These teachers were known as “teaching partners,” who helped release the case study teachers to participate in professional growth and class reviews.
- Performing artists (art, music, drama, puppetry, theatre, poetry, story telling) including a resident artist performed regularly in the school. These experiences were commonly linked to classroom programs. The arts became a major medium for instruction throughout the school, across subjects, ages and classrooms.
- I organized 50% of my time to be engaged in activities such as observing, facilitating, gathering evidence, researching and planning towards the goal of providing pedagogical leadership.