

STUDIES IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP 5

Christopher Day
Kenneth Leithwood
Editors

Successful Principal Leadership in Times of Change

An International Perspective

 Springer

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SUCCESSFUL PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF CHANGE

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VOLUME 5

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The volumes – monographs and edited volumes – should represent work from different parts in the world.

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SUCCESSFUL PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF CHANGE

An International Perspective

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A C.I.P. Catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4020-5515-7 (HB)

ISBN 978-1-4020-5516-4 (e-book)

Published by Springer,
P.O. Box 17, 3300 AA Dordrecht, The Netherlands.

www.springer.com

Printed on acid-free paper

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CHAPTER 1

STARTING WITH WHAT WE KNOW

KENNETH LEITHWOOD AND CHRISTOPHER DAY

SETTING THE STAGE

This is the “golden age” of school leadership. Reformers widely agree that it is central to the success with which their favorite solutions actually work in schools (e.g., [Murphy & Datnow, 2003](#)). Many parents have come to believe that unless they have the ear of the head or principal, concerns about their child’s schooling will fall through the cracks. Members of the business community, long enamored by the “romance of leadership”, to use a term coined by [Meindl \(1995\)](#), assume that the shortcomings of schools are coincident with shortcomings in their leadership. And the research community has, at long last, produced a sufficient body of empirical evidence to persuade even the most skeptical that school leadership matters (e.g., [Hallinger & Heck, 1996](#)). Nothing aborts an ambitious school improvement effort, we now know, faster than a change in school leadership ([Hargreaves & Fink, 2004](#); [Leithwood, Jantzi, & McElheron-Hopkins, 2006](#)).

Governments and foundations around the world are devoting unparalleled resources to the development of aspiring leaders, as well as those already in the role. While England’s *National College for School Leadership* is the most visible example of this investment, virtually all developed countries are in the midst of unprecedented, if less dramatic, efforts to improve the quality of existing programs and to launch fresh initiatives (e.g., [Hallinger, 2003](#)).

It is no coincidence that these efforts are taking place in the face of tremendous pressure for public schools to be more publicly accountable. Such pressures are the outcome of an alignment in the position of those with neo-liberal, neo-conservative and new right ideologies about the job to be done about public education.¹ This aligned position, with minor variations, is now largely adhered to by political parties of all stripes. It is a position, sometimes called “new managerialism” ([Peters, 1992](#)) which embraces managerial efficiency and effectiveness as a key lever for reforming

public institutions. This position, in addition, has created a very different working context for both teachers and school leaders than the context in which many of them “grew up” professionally. So efforts to better understand the consequences of that political context for the work of school leaders is quite crucial.

Evidence for the Book

This book describes results of research undertaken during the first-stage of the *International Successful School Principal Project* (ISSPP). Begun in 2001, our project aimed to better understand what successful heads and principals do in today’s demanding accountability context, a context shared *more or less* by the successful leaders we studied in eight developed countries – *more* in Tasmania (Chapter 2), Victoria, Australia (Chapter 3), England (Chapter 4), Canada (Chapter 8), China (Chapter 9) and the United States (Chapter 10); *less*, but quickly catching up, in Norway (Chapter 5), Sweden (Chapter 6), and Denmark (Chapter 7).

Schools and principals were selected in each research site using, whenever possible, evidence of student achievement beyond expectations on state or national tests, principals’ reputations in the community and/or school system as being exemplary, and other indicators of success that were country- and/or site-specific (e.g., the use of democratic leadership practices). These criteria, summarized in Table 1.1, helped to ensure that principals selected for study had been “successful” based on criteria common to all, as well as additional criteria unique to each country where there were such criteria.

At the point of writing this book, we had collected evidence about successful leadership in sixty-three schools. Table 1.2 summarizes key features of these schools including level (elementary, middle, high school), size, and school context and

Table 1.1. Principal and school selection criteria

Criteria for selecting principals	Countries (chapter number)
School reputation	2, 3, 7, 9, 10
Exceptional school programs	2, 9
Principal reputation with peers and/or senior administrators	2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9
Student achievement beyond expectation or improving over time	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Student engagement	2, 3, 7
Student social development	3, 6
Acting in accord with democratic values	5
School improvement defined by creative use of learning and teaching strategies	5
Safe and inclusive environment	5
Efficient and flexible use of resources	5
Democratic and collaborative approach to decision making	5, 7

Table 1.2. Characteristics of schools

Countries	Number of schools	School level	School size (students)	Context & location
Tasmania	5	1 elementary, 1 mixed, 3 high	225 – 551 (m = 410)	Government, rural & suburban
Victoria	9	mixed	120 – 1330 (m = 511)	Government, Independent and Catholic urban schools;
England	10	mixed	200 – 1830 (m = 639)	Urban and suburban; challenging social environments
Norway	12	mixed	140 – 950 (m = 360)	Public; urban, rural and semi-rural;
Sweden	4	Junior high	120 – 1250 (m = 568)	Rural, urban
Denmark	2 (of 8)	mixed	350 – 500 (m = 400)	Urban, suburban
Canada	6	elementary	300 – 650 (m = 400)	Urban, suburban, rural
China	2	1 senior, 1 junior high	1625 – 2000 (m = 1812)	Urban
United States	7	5 elementary, 1 middle, 1 high	397 – 883 (m = 617)	Urban, suburban, rural

location. Schools serving students from the early to the later grades were included in our samples, in most countries. The contexts and locations of the schools, as well as their size, varied considerably within most countries. But we did not systematically inquire about the relationship between principal leadership and any of these variables. By qualitative research standards, this is remarkably large – very likely an unprecedented number – of educational leadership cases conducted from a relatively common perspective, using largely similar data collection techniques.

The evidence for these cases typically consisted of document reviews and interviews with principals, teachers, students and parents. Almost all interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis. While case reports were then prepared for most of the sixty-three individual schools, the chapters in this book provide a syntheses of case study results within each country, not individual cases. While syntheses of this sort lose some of the rich detail found in individual cases, they offer us a better sense of what is similar and different across cases and countries, a primary goal for us in preparing this book. More specifically, research on which the book is based was intended to: clarify the nature of successful principal leadership, how such leadership influences students learning and what lies behind (or gives

rise to) it. Our research also aimed to uncover differences among countries in the way success is defined and how high-stakes assessments and accountability measures influence the practices of successful principals.

A Framework for Sampling the Initial Knowledge Base

Successful leadership is a highly interactive business. Indeed, we are inclined to agree with Wood that "... the essence of leadership is not the individual social actor but a relationship of almost imperceptible directions, movements and orientations having neither beginning nor end" (2005, p. 1115). And while reciprocity is fundamental to such relationships, the defining contribution to an organization of a "leaderful" relationship is the emergence of a shared sense of direction along with *perceptible* influence, eventually, on organizational members to move in that direction. Direction and influence are at the core of almost all conceptions of leadership.

While the essence of leadership, as we have portrayed it here, is both subtle and complex, at least many of the things we set out to learn about the leadership of successful principals in our study are quite straightforward to describe, as we illustrate in Figure [1.1]. We view this figure simply as a generic tool for organizing a research agenda aimed at better understanding matters commonly of interest about virtually any occupational group (e.g., teaching, accounting, lawyering) not just principals. It is about:

- the nature of what members of the group actually do (their overt practices or behaviors – the independent variables in Figure [1.1]),
- what it is that prompts those overt practices (e.g., principals' prior experiences, values, beliefs – the antecedent variables in Figure [1.1]),
- the most important effects of those practices (e.g. student learning in the case of principals – the dependent variables in Figure [1.1]),
- what it is that enhances or diminishes the effects of their practice (e.g., teacher trust – the moderating variables in Figure [1.1]), and
- elements of the organization through which leaders work in order to help achieve those important outcomes (e.g., school culture – the mediating variables in Figure [1.1]).

As our earlier definition of leadership should make clear, the lines joining variables in Figure [1.1] are not intended to suggest that relationships among the elements in the figure are actually linear or only one-way, in the real world. But the lines do convey a simplified logic that is helpful to researchers in focusing some types of research efforts. A good understanding of the figure also helps consumers of research better understand how the results of a study such as ours might inform their own practice. It is of considerable practical value to know, for example, that the indirect effects on student learning of the same set of principal leadership practices depend, a great deal, on the level of trust teachers have in their principal.

So the figure helps to organize and clarify the purposes of some research efforts in a way that is often difficult to achieve otherwise. In the case of quantitative

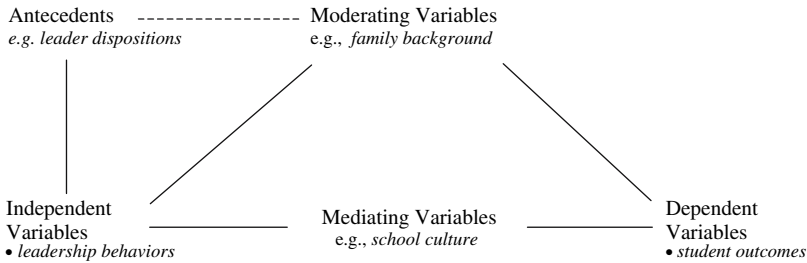


Figure 1.1. Framework for sampling knowledge about principal leadership

research, such a conception of relationships among variables is necessary if one is to make sense of one's data at all.

But it needs to be stressed that Figure [1.1] is not a *theory* of anything. Rather it is a tool for getting organized to develop and/or test a theory – or in the case of this chapter – to describe the results of previous efforts. To illustrate, Lord & Maher (1993) have developed a theory explaining how members of an organization come to attribute “leadership” to some of their colleagues and not others. This theory suggests that people’s leadership “prototypes” are one of several sources of this attribution. Prototypes are cognitive structures developed from an early age and over long periods of time. They are used as the basis for judging the actions of one’s colleagues. When those actions match significant features of a person’s leadership prototype, the person is inclined to consider the colleague (or group of colleagues) a “leader” thereby volunteering to be a “follower”, however temporarily. This theory, then, suggest that teachers’ leadership prototypes might be important moderators of principals’ leadership practices; furthermore, it is a testable theory. This brief account of leadership prototype theory, then, helps make clear that Figure [1.1] is useful for organizing existing theory and evidence, or getting organized to generate some theory and evidence, without, in itself, being a theory of anything.

The remaining sections of this chapter aim to give the reader a flavor of the knowledge base our work set out to extend. But two caveats are in order before we proceed. First, our review necessarily provides a consensus interpretation of the results of prior research, although we achieved no such consensus as a team, just to give readers a flavor of the challenges faced in undertaking large scale, multi-team international research. The second caveat to our review is that we make no claims to being comprehensive. As much as we might like to, this chapter can only provide a sample of the knowledge base with which we began our research.

Successful Principal Leadership Practices

By far the largest majority of educational leadership studies have been about the practices of principals or heads, the independent variable in Figure [1.1]. We know much more about such practices than we do, for example, about their sources or what

it is that mediates and moderates their effects on students. Furthermore, evidence provided by research carried out in non-school organizations often confirms and supports the results of leadership studies in schools.²

This evidence, as a whole, points to four broad categories of basic leadership practices. Hallinger & Heck (1999) label three of these categories “purposes,” “people,” and “structures and social systems.” Conger & Kanungo (1998) speak about “visioning strategies,” “efficacy-building strategies,” and “context changing strategies.” Leithwood’s (1994) categories are “setting directions”, “developing people” and “redesigning the organization.” Within each of these similar categories of practice are numerous, more specific competencies, orientations, and considerations. Evidence generated in school contexts about specific successful leadership practices, within each of these broad categories can be found in four sources, all of which attempt to be comprehensive, including: Leithwood & Rieh’s (2003) and Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins (2006) reviews of what is presently known about successful school leadership; the ISLLC standards (Council of Chief School State Officers, 1996) for school leaders now adopted in more than 40 American states as central goals for both initial and some continuing leadership development programs; Hallinger’s (2001) model of instructional leadership, by far the most fully specified and widely researched conception of instructional leadership available; and a meta-analysis of specific leadership practices influencing student learning produced by Waters, Marzano & McNulty (2003).

A fourth broad category of leadership practices, “Managing the Instructional Program,” is unique to schools and explicitly reflects concerns about the principal’s role in improving instruction. These concerns have given rise to the widespread interest in, and research about, models of instruction leadership especially popular in North America. Most of the chapters in this book find evidence of successful principals engaging in all four categories of practice and several chapters explicitly frame a portion of their findings around such categories (Chapters 8 and 10).

Building vision and setting directions This category of practices accounts for the largest proportion of leadership effects. One of the central functions of direction-setting leadership practices is motivation. Most theories of motivation (e.g., Bandura, 1986) argue that people are motivated to accomplish personally important goals for themselves. Building on such theory, this set of practices aims not only to identify important goals for the school organization, but to do so in such a way that individual organizational members come to include the organization’s goals among their own. Unless this happens, the organization’s goals have no motivational value. So leaders can productively spend a lot of time on this set of practices. Three more specific sets of practices are typically included in this category, all aimed at bringing a focus to both the individual and collective work of staff in the school or district – identifying and articulating a vision, fostering agreement about group goals and demonstrating high performance expectations.

Understanding and developing people Three specific sets of practices are typically associated with this broad category including providing support to individual staff,

offering intellectual stimulation that promotes reflection and modeling desired values and practices. As a whole, this category of practices aims at capacity building – not only staffs’ knowledge and skills but their disposition to persist in applying that knowledge and skill in challenging circumstances. Socio-psychological theory (Bandura, 1986) tells us that people are motivated to persist at tasks about which they feel efficacious and that their sense of efficaciousness is powerfully influenced by the sort of mastery experiences normally associated with effective staff development initiatives of both a formal and informal type; building capacity leading to a sense of mastery is highly motivational.

Designing the organization Three specific leadership practices in this broad category include: building collaborative cultures, creating structures to support such collaboration, and developing productive working relations with parents and families. These practices aim to establish the conditions of work and organizational infrastructure which allow staff to make the most of their motivations and capacities. This broad category of practices follows Understanding and developing people in terms of its contribution to leadership effects. Its significant effects can be understood through the lens provided by Bandura’s (1986) theory of human motivation. People are motivated when they believe the circumstances in which they find themselves are conducive to accomplishing the goals they hold to be personally important.

Managing the teaching and learning program Evidence about this category of leadership practices began to emerge many years ago from research on effective schools (e.g., Reynolds, 1998). Such evidence suggested that school leaders who made a significant difference in student learning paid very careful attention to teaching and learning in their schools. But just which instructional management practices matter most remains unclear. For example, Hallinger (2003) has found that those management practices in his instructional leadership model which involve close attention to teachers’ classroom practices, and the supervision of such practices, have weaker effects than do leadership practices focused more widely on the school organization. Other studies of school principal effects that measure both their leadership and management behaviors (e.g., Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999, 2000) have found that these more broadly focused principal management behaviors explain almost as much of principals’ effects as do leadership behaviors. So they are important, as a class, especially those that create stability and strengthen the infrastructure. But those of a more supervisory nature seem less influential even though such “close to the classroom” leadership is often what advocates of instructional leadership are aiming to encourage.

Four more specific sets of leadership practices included in this broad category bring together managerial practices found in both Hallinger’s instructional leadership model and a model of transformational school leadership developed by Leithwood & Jantzi (e.g., 1999, 2000, 2005) for which there is growing evidence of impact on students. These four sets of practices include: staffing the school’s program with teachers well matched to the school’s priorities (these practices are