

Review

Lessons from Two Decades of Research about Successful School Leadership in England: A Humanistic Approach

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Abstract: This paper reviews the research on successful school principalship carried out in England over the last 20 years. Drawing on evidence synthesized from the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) and related English school leadership research conducted by ISSPP scholars, this review aims to answer a conceptual research question: How do the principalship's moral purposes and contextual understanding shape the time-sensitive, informed adoption of combinations and accumulations of strategies that lead to sustained school success? This paper identifies five research insights derived from case studies in England and elaborates on the complex, values-led layered web of interactions between the school principal and key stakeholders within and outside the school in the context of frequent social changes and policy interventions in England. Whilst the pace has been greater and more intense than in many other countries, the direction has been, and remains, similar. The body of scholarship here reviewed engages with national policies as filtered and then enacted by successful principals. While 'effective' principals lead to students' success as measured by performance on national tests and examinations, our focus is upon an empirically founded definition of 'successful' school leadership that is located in complexity theory and encompasses the enactment of the core purposes of education that include but go beyond the functional. In doing so, it avoids 'what to do' formulae and the limitations of certain theoretical 'leadership' models, finding that successful school leaders' work embodies a broader humanistic view of student learning and achievement, which implies the preordination of the personal over the functional. Taken together, these research insights contribute to the ISSPP's continued effort to refine and advance the knowledge base of successful school leadership within and across different countries.

Keywords: successful school leadership; leadership practices and school improvement; moral purposes

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the research on successful school principalship carried out in England over the last 20 years. A range of research by ISSPP members from more than 20 countries over the last two decades has found that, regardless of national contexts, cultures, policies, and individual school contexts and conditions, successful principals' work takes place in schools as complex adaptive systems and is predicated upon educational purposes that include but are broader than the functional, founded on principles of social justice and inclusion [1]. Implicitly, it rejects linear and predictive explanations or singular views of truth about how principals achieve success, asserting that their work is dynamic, emergent, and dependent on the interaction of several variables, not all of which can be observed or predicted, but all of which are connected [2].

The English school leadership research strand is dedicated to the investigation of successful school leadership practices for improvement, particularly in disadvantaged

urban communities, modes of teachers' work and lives, as well as the dynamic interrelation between internal and external school contexts. It is emblematic that the origins of the ISSPP and of its methodology lie in an earlier multiperspective study of schools in England [3]. The primary aim of that research was to: (i) collect data from a multiplicity of perspectives including those of head teachers, deputy head teachers, governors, parents, students, support staff, and teachers; (ii) compare effective principalship/headship in contexts ranging from small primary schools to large urban secondary schools; (iii) identify the personal qualities and professional competencies that are generic to effective headship in schools; (iv) re-examine existing theoretical perspectives on school headship through insights derived from new empirical research; and (v) contribute to the wider educational debate on the relationships between headship and school effectiveness and improvement in terms of 'success' and with an international sample of studies. A sample of case study schools was selected. These were of different sizes and phases, located in a range of economic and socio-cultural settings, in which head teachers were widely acknowledged as being 'successful' head teachers over time. In that study, 'effective' head teachers were selected [4].

At the heart of this body of scholarship lies an indirect critique of the existing New Public Management (NPM) framework as policy-driven definitions converging on simple, transparent, and accountable practices. In general, the policy context for English schools is similar to that in most other countries. However, whilst the direction of policy travel is similar, the pace has been much faster. Since the early 1970s (Ruskin Speech), governments have become increasingly interested both in the relationship between education and the economy, and the potential of education to reduce social inequalities. Many of their subsequent reforms from the 1980s onwards resulted in a movement from centralised public administration decision-making to what became known as NPM, which assumes increases in efficiency, effectiveness, and value through enhanced private sector involvement in the delivery of public services and the breakup of larger bureaucracies. This led to a greater emphasis, within these smaller units, on localised responsibilities and accountabilities for performance and measurable outputs [5]. The creation of lean, flat, and small organisational units, in the case of English education, was deemed to enable better decision-making, since they were, by definition, closer to their public. Factoring in the reported increases in teacher attrition and increasing difficulties in the recruitment of school principals, these systemic structural changes in school governance provide a portrait of the multiple, intensive challenges that all principals in England face, especially those who lead schools serving high-need communities.

Much of the leadership research in England either focuses on 'training' (e.g., [6–8]) or school 'effectiveness' and school improvement [9–12]. More recent focus has extended to include wellbeing [13,14], diversity including race [15,16], and leadership for social justice [17]. The meaning of 'success' or how principals grow and sustain success may be elusive. Yet there are those principals who, regardless of geographies and demography, achieve and sustain success. It is these on whom the ISSPP research focuses. Its work examines how a strong sense of professional agency, persistent resilience, and values-embedded professional identity, as expressed through service ethics (moral purpose), commitment, robust decision-making, and rich interpersonal relationships, contribute to principal success, despite the challenges of the conditions and contexts in which they are enacted.

Based on the English research strand of successful principalship, this review aims to answer a conceptual research question: How do the principalship's moral purposes and contextual understanding shape the time-sensitive, informed adoption of combinations and accumulations of strategies that lead to sustained school success? We will argue that a moral purpose is in place whilst addressing policy challenges and in the case of a 'passion for success' posture. At the same time, finely tuned contextual understandings, especially of the internal environment, are key to promoting improvement, defined as including academic progress and the attainments of students. Successful leaders, however, go beyond this narrow functional 'human capital' view of education, particularly through

carefully chosen leadership practices, adopted in what principals discern is the ‘right order’ and as layering aspects that overlap, interact, and combine effectively to lead to a more complex set of human capability development strategies. Our analysis distinguishes between humanistic and functional approaches (see [18]) to leadership practices, seen as two poles of a continuum. Whilst both are required, a humanistic orientation has proved to be key to successful leadership.

2. Methodology

The origins of the ISSPP research go back to a multiperspective study by Day and colleagues as early as 2000. Over the years, key elements of this perspective have emerged and have been piloted thereafter in England through Day’s leading scholarship in this field. Galvanised by this and subsequent early ISSPP study [19], an international group engaged in multiple perspective case studies exploring the characteristics, qualities, and practices of principals leading successful schools [20]. The ISSPP methodology proceeds with case selection of:

- Schools of different sizes and different phases of education (i.e., the early years of primary schooling through upper secondary, including special schools).
- Schools located within a range of geographic, economic, and socio-cultural settings (i.e., rural, suburban, and inner-urban schools as well as those with mixed (economically and culturally diverse) catchment areas).
- Schools led by principals who are widely acknowledged (e.g., by reputation, and/or school performance records) as being ‘successful’ leaders, whether male or female [4].

The multiperspective data are based on specific interview protocols as key qualitative data, while the quantitative questionnaire is supplementary with various school actors: teachers, deputy head teachers, governors, parents, students, support staff, and teachers. It implies comparing effective principalship in contexts ranging from small primary schools to large urban secondary schools with the identification of the personal qualities and professional competencies, which are generic to effective headship in schools. The re-examination of existing theoretical perspectives aims to contribute to the wider educational debate on the relationships between headship and school effectiveness and improvements in terms of ‘success’.

Based on their research experience with the English context, the promoters of this field have trialled their conceptual and methodological tools in creative ways in their context, that is, in English schools. Their inspired exploration of this national case has been less orthodox compared to what happened in other contexts. Their main interest has been theory-building and testing while coherently remaining faithful to their paradigm and methodological choices. There is a paradox in how this school of thought has developed over time. The English research tradition has produced early works and, over the years, think-pieces about advancing the field conceptually and internationally. At the same time, only recently has it started to engage with the production of national cases that explicitly and specifically deploy the research guidelines produced for international research groups. This fact can be explained by the experimental traits of English scholars in their own context, in which successful school leadership originated as a global paradigm.

Therefore, this paper reports on case studies within the ISSPP project framework [2] with the adoption of its interview protocols. At the same time, it acknowledges the relevance of broader scholarship [21–26], which contributed to the consolidation of the successful leadership field through coherent methodologies and themes.

While this review is not entirely based on ISSPP publications, it captures essential elements such as the conceptual coherence about how success and ‘successful leadership’ are defined and the adoption of complexity and system theories, and it draws on multiperspective data. This paper is grounded in the ISSPP research tradition and extends the evidence base for understanding successful leadership in schools in England over time. In

this sense and from an epistemological point of view, it offers a unique view of how this field has developed beyond its specific borders.

Table 1. Caption.

Selected Studies	Methodology	Themes
Day, Sammons & Gu (2016)[23]	Mixed methods, SEM analysis, case studies	Layered, integrated leadership impacts improvement Phases of school improvement
Gu, Mincu & Day (2023)[2]	Interviews, 1 full case study	Changing the school governance and culture through “positive disruption”; principal’s biography, creative policy enactment
Gu, Sammons & Chen, 2018 [25]	SEM analysis, 4 case studies	Creative policy enactment
Gu & Johanson 2013 [24]	Interviews, 2 comparative case studies	English primary school; the alignment of the internal and external school contexts in school development
Day & Gu, 2018[26]	Interviews, 2 full case studies	Values and purposes shape cultures; principals’ biographies divergence and convergence with external policy demands
Day 2014 [22]	1 case study	Layered development phases

Several themes have emerged from the analysis of the selected pool of papers: (1) the creative enactment of policies and the general relevance of biographies; (2) the power of shaping internal contexts and reaching out to communities to promote improvement; (3) key behaviours and attitudes such as the passion for success in challenging circumstances; (4) the synergistic alignment in leadership practices; and (5) the dynamic nature of improvement through the ‘layering’ of leadership practices and serving disadvantaged communities.

3. Policy Challenges Generate Creative Enactment, and the Biographical Turn

The theorising of policy enactment has been examined in much literature through critical sociological, organisational, social psychological, and cognitive theories [25]. Ball, Maguire, Braun, and Hoskins [27] suggest, for example, that policy actors are involved in the process of reading and writing policy as well as being producers and consumers of policy. In investigating successful principals “in times of intense and pervasive policy reforms” [25] (p.3) rather than policy or policy analysis *per se*, the authors identify the ways in which secondary principals in England had led their schools to achieve sustainable high performance within this policy context.

A range of international research literature has demonstrated that “the most effective leaders have strong moral and ethical purposes and a strong sense of social justice” [26] (p. 333). “Principals’ vision, values and qualities and their strong sense of agency play an integral role” [24] (p. 324) in school improvement. In addition to a strong commitment or passion for social justice, leaders need “a strong sense of moral purpose, trustworthiness, persistence, flexible thinking and commitment” [24] (p. 323). Research reports, however, a “complex interplay” [26] (p. 342) for principals navigating “the inherent tensions between the enactment of their deep-seated educational values and adherence to government-mandated policies” [26] (p. 342). Put simply, “[t]hose whose values correspond less closely are likely to face greater challenges in achieving success as defined by government than those whose values correspond more closely” [26] (p. 332). In the recent ISSPP English study, this theme emerges powerfully, since the principal is deeply committed to supporting and inspiring ‘the underdogs’ and the ‘disempowered’ [2].

The process of policy enactment has been described in terms of interpretation, translation, and implementation of external policies in different educational organisations by principals as ‘writers of policy’ [25] (p. 2). In other words, enacting policies is a process of re-interpretation and re-contextualisation in which policy actors work creatively in divergent ways [25]. In incorporating and embedding external policies into a pre-eminent whole school activity, “demands were internalised (and sometimes transformed) to become our policy” [26] (p. 335). Additionally, policy enactment was “a value-laden and value-driven process in which principals expressed their educational values and monitored standards through (re)designing leadership structures... reshaping school improvement processes, and reenergising and further developing cultures, relationships, and classroom practices”. Gu, Sammons and Chen [25] take this further by identifying leaders who are alert to statutory policy, which has to be ‘done’, but may be ‘potentially transient in nature’ (p. 16) and has a broader ‘moral purpose’ underpinning school development and change. In that research, the school “positioned itself ahead of educational policy” (p. 16) and senior and middle leaders shared caution in simply being reactive to government reforms. A senior deputy principal captures this by stating that “...at the end of the day if you look at government policy it comes and it goes, doesn’t it? But the needs of the students don’t change that much...” (p. 16). In the English ISSPP study, these findings are amply confirmed. The school principal did not believe that her role was about rigidly following the requirements of external policies and inspections. Rather, she saw herself as ‘gatekeeper’ of external demands and learned from other leaders’ mediation of externally imposed reform [2].

Day and Gu [26] offer a nuanced consideration of policy enactment to include the profound influence that principals’ biographies played in “shaping the cultures, policy-making processes, and educational practices within their schools and in causing them to reshape external policy demands in different ways” (p. 342) in addition to “their own, earlier educational experiences” (p. 334). The authors recognise, however, that “principals with similar moral purposes may face challenges of divergence or convergence of values and practices, and these may affect the ability of their schools to conform and comply with policy directives” (p. 343), especially in a policy reform context, which requires and monitors compliance. The commonly held view that educational policy can “compel principals to compromise their own values in order to function does not apply” [24,26]. Reported cases of successful schools identify these as those that position themselves “ahead of policy and are cautious to be too reactive to government reform” [25] (p. 16), whilst adopting internal accountability focused on pupils.

4. Shaping Internal Contexts and Reaching out to Communities to Promote Improvement

Scholarship has engaged in different ways with the influence of contexts on practices. Whilst the external school context may be characterised in terms of socio-economic status, school size [28], and level, the ‘internal context’ is unpacked in terms of school cultures [29] and types of structures, relationships, and leadership values, strategies, and practices. The studies conducted on the English case of successful school improvement have engaged with the external context in terms of diversity of student intake as ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic background, as well as “high levels of pupils turnover and absenteeism, poor parental support and limited community engagement with school activities” [24] (p. 307). This line of scholarship has provided a more coherent, nuanced, and robust elaboration of the leadership of the environments in which schools evolve. In particular, schools’ internal context is defined to encompass “the availability of human and material resources, staff morale, collegiality and capacity, conditions and cultures for learning and teaching, leadership distribution, pupils’ behaviour and academic achievement” [24] (p. 302). The complex interaction of external and internal contexts follows a pattern of ‘sliding scales’. Whilst the external environment, composed of policy and community-embedded challenges, may not be fundamentally different across countries, in high school autonomy

school systems with extended school leadership roles, successful principals deeply and gradually restructure the internal culture and processes while achieving a collective sense of belonging, agency, and commitment.

A dynamic interaction between the external and the internal led to the identification of key improvement practices in the early stages of an improvement journey in these schools: restructuring the physical environment, raising pupil and staff expectations, and partnering with parents and social services in order to promote a happy and secure context and support parents in their children's education. Other aspects have proved essential, such as a shared vision and a flexible and focused curriculum as well as responsive and differentiated professional development. The moderating effects of the external context can variously impact upon the internal conditions that play a mediating effect, depending on the specific moment in time (in terms of phases of improvement). In other words, when both internal and external challenges are high in low-performing schools, successful principals prioritise material, social, and human resources, reconciling these contexts through an emphasis on growing social capital and instilling a culture of resilience and optimism. An example of how contextual boundaries can be transcended comes from the ISSPP study, where the key relevance of bashing the school–community boundaries to create belonging is a key priority of a positive disruptive leader [2]. Bridging the social connection between the school and families and bringing school life into the community to better support children's learning and development is vital. Thus, 'educating the whole house' is a necessary step in combatting the lack of learning resources. In addition, breaking down the physical and relational boundaries within and beyond the school signifies the start of the journey to success [2].

5. Behaviours and Attitudes: Passion for Success in Challenging Circumstances

While the word 'passion' might lie for some in domains other than education, for example, love, romance, or specialist interests, the identification of passion amongst school principals has offered an essential characteristic for understanding what constitutes their leadership success. As early as 2004, Day locates passion for education, for pupils, and for their communities as crucial in their day-to-day work. "Leading well over time is a struggle and it takes passion to continue to encourage self and others to continue to lead and learn in changing and challenging times" [30] (p. 436). Many leaders, successful or otherwise, may go into teaching and school leadership with a sense of commitment to education, but in Day's (2004) research, this commitment is "deep and passionate" (p. 426). Regardless of the challenges, tensions, and struggles the leaders faced, their "passion for education and, within this, their passionate desire for success of all their students' prevailed. Passion was associated with enthusiasm for achievement, caring, collaboration, commitment, trust, inclusivity and courage" [30](p. 427), and fairness and understanding.

Drawing from the data, this is usefully understood in practical terms as: listening to what staff and students say, being close rather than distant, having a good sense of playfulness and humour, encouraging staff and students to learn in different ways, relating learning to experience, encouraging all to take a collegial responsibility for learning, maintaining organised school and classroom environments, being knowledgeable about their work, creating learning environments that engage both staff and students, and stimulating in them an excitement to learn [30](p. 427).

Importantly within the context of New Public Management directives at the time of the paper, a 'passion for trust' [30](p. 432) is especially relevant. Then, as now, the "new rules of conduct... seem to emphasise managerialism and bureaucracy at the expense of teaching" [30] (p. 436). The "exercise of trust, focuses upon teachers' motivation and self-efficacy and the emphasis on the creation and sustained building of productive, participative community relationships" [30] (p. 432). This allows people to do their job with a minimum amount of interference [30] (p. 433) while feeling trusted.

More recently, within the qualities and responsibilities of successful principals, trust is concomitant with optimism, hope, ethical purpose, vulnerability, and risk [22]. To

accommodate the diverse and sometimes competing demands of policy, local context, and educational values, successful leaders “exercise a greater range of strategic and interpersonal qualities and skills” (p. 639) than ever before. Day [22] locates this assertion within the new age of public accountability. This is a context within which the agreed-upon moral and ethical values drive the daily interactions by which school leaders exist. In the many social arenas within which leadership occurs, these are often “charged with emotion” [22] (p. 639). At the time of this paper, social inequalities in the aftermath of the pandemic have been exacerbated. This is the context within which school leaders must function, and emotional resilience becomes essential. By being resilient, leaders are able to “build and support in others the capacity and capabilities to be resilient” [22] (p. 652). The English ISSPP study confirmed the relevance of passion and commitment of a ‘positive disruptor’ in leading change. It is about the future of children empowering leaders to be curious about learning and have the courage to take risks [2].

6. Leadership Practices: Synergistic Alignment

The research strand on leadership for improvement is characterized by a clear focus on diagnosing students’ individual, school, and society needs. It is not about principals’ leadership ‘styles’, or differentiating between different ‘adjectival’ models, as most of the existing scholarship has struggled to show. Rather, it has the profile of a meticulous understanding of the local conditions, followed by an identification of those successful values-informed strategies, which are, in addition, sensitive to the demands of multiple contexts in which principals work.

One major suggestion, which can answer our research question, is related to the idea of alignment between values and actions. The human dimension, read as a personal biography rooted in a passion for a success posture, effectively aligns with a clear moral commitment to serve deprived communities, and this in turn underpins “all diagnoses, decisions, strategies, and actions in relation to how policies should be interpreted and enacted” [26] (p. 335). This has been effectively summarised in a quasi-practical wisdom principle: doing the right things at the right time, informed by the ‘right’ values [26] (p. 335). Correct diagnosis, followed by the right combination of structures, roles and responsibilities, relationships, and teaching strategies (and “in the right order” see Rowe, 2006 related to learning sciences) related to specific learners’ profiles represent a convergent reasoning with our improvement-related finding, both based on empirical evidence.

What may appear as an anecdotal outcome or practical wisdom has been clearly demonstrated in a major mixed-methods study (IMPACT), whose results we will briefly summarise. One suggestion has to do with a cumulative effect of major factors, identified as ‘synergistic influences’ and reported in a series of studies [21,31–33]. This research revealed a combination and accumulation of relatively small effects of leadership practices that are able to orient school improvement processes towards the same direction: the findings were that such practices promote better teaching and learning and improve the school culture, especially in relation to pupil behaviour and attendance, as well as motivation and engagement. In addition, findings from the same study, based on structural equation models of primary and secondary schools, identified four groups of latent variables and illustrated how transformational and instructional leadership strategies were used by principals to generate school improvement and improve pupil outcomes [23]. The synergy of leadership influences begins with principals setting directions and restructuring the organisation, and this, in turn, promotes teacher development and support, and high-quality teaching and learning. Building trusting relationships with teachers and the senior leadership team proved to be a key leadership strategy related to the distribution of leadership within the school and, through this, the transformation of the social and relational conditions of schools. For a ‘positive disruptive’ leader, the synergy is framed as an essential ability to see the systems—not simply in terms of understanding how one system might impact another positively or negatively, but knowing how to join different dots

together to create coherence and consistency in the complex and dynamic systems of education [2].

This synergy of leadership influences relates to specific combinations of transformational and instructional leadership strategies (rather than models) used by secondary and primary school leaders to create the conditions for improvement. In this model, transformational strategies (e.g., setting directions and restructuring the organisation) come first and are shaped by the principal's skills in diagnosing the school's needs. One interesting finding at that time was that instructional leadership strategies tended to be encapsulated in their respective latent factor, while those that were related to transformation and change formed distinct latent variables. Neither instructional leadership strategies nor transformational leadership strategies alone were sufficient to promote improvement [23].

7. The Dynamic Nature of Improvement: The 'Layering' of Leadership Practices and Serving Disadvantaged Communities

In a major mixed-methods national study (IMPACT), Day, Gu, and Sammons [23] formulated a compelling 'layering' conception of practices, "within and across different phases of their schools' improvement process. Principals selected, clustered, integrated, and placed different emphases on different combinations of both transformational and instructional strategies that were timely and fit for purpose" [23]. This dynamic dimension characterises how principals adopt both approaches in different ways, matching features of leadership, school, and classroom processes in order to prompt improvement in schools' internal conditions and pupil outcomes. Their influence acts through developing teachers and promoting teaching quality, as well as a school climate made of high expectations. The process of improvement over time was found to follow several broad but not always predictable phases: foundational, developmental, enrichment, and renewal phases [23].

The Eyhampton High school example shows synergies across and within such stages: "combined and accumulated both transformational and instructional leadership strategies within, through, and across each developmental phase of their schools' long-term improvement" (p. 251). Another example of the integration of transformational and instructional strategies is 'pupil behaviour', which figures in different ways in all phases and is expressed as 'pupil behaviour' in phase 1, 'pupil behaviour and pastoral care' and 'pupil voice' in phase 2, 'pupil-centred learning' in phase 3, and 'focus on learning and inclusion' in phase 4.

In addition, this body of research has clearly demonstrated that successful principals located in disadvantaged communities exhibit wider strategies and more intense behaviours. Considering the persistently high levels of challenge, they "apply greater combinations or clusters of strategies with greater intensity and use a broader range of personal and social skills than do those in other schools which serve more advantaged communities" [22] (p. 643). Most of these leadership practices are deemed as essential components and pertain to the realm of values, refining and aligning the organisation, and setting directions. It can be noted, that on one hand, equity-oriented and moral leadership are particularly relevant to effective practices of improvement. On the other hand, behaviour management is a key component, whilst distributed leadership is less so. It emerges that humanistic and moral aspects prove to be powerful tools for school improvement of schools located in more difficult socio-economic circumstances. Qualitative studies clearly display the humanistic dimension in the biography of exemplary principals. One such figure is David, embodying courage, vulnerability, and fatigue [22]. He deliberately challenges government officials and what is perceived to be a scripted scenario for improvement. He identifies as key ingredients of his divergent way to turn this school around "a the 'can do' attitude of staff and pupils, their willingness to make learning fun, their focus on 'wonder' and their relentless efforts to increase the self-belief of pupils and teachers and the school's imaginative links to the university" [22] (p. 649). His vulnerability and his passion for this needy community define his humanistic approach.

Linked to a humanistic approach, the importance of establishing consistency and coherence in school improvement structures, cultures, and processes [25] as a functionalist key ingredient cannot be underestimated. These scholars show that “[b]uilding collective capacity in schools is not a simple, linear process” (p. 22). A major role is indeed played by shared understandings “between those who led and those who were led” (p. 22).

8. Discussion

The case studies underpinning this paper are drawn from research committed to the principles of the ISSPP. These include multiperspective and multi-layered research. The broader pool of research papers led by ISSPP scholars have followed the same definition of ‘success’ adopted by ISSPP and methodological choices in selecting cases and methods. Including some papers beyond the ISSPP publications is conceptually and methodologically coherent. It offers richer narratives to understand what successful leadership means and how it is configured in the English context. Thus, the research strand reviewed in this article makes two important conceptual and methodological contributions to the field of educational leadership over the last two decades.

First, using mixed quantitative and qualitative methodologies has enabled the researchers to focus on broader definitions of ‘success’ that go beyond the simple quantitative measures of student academic outcomes. Second, the school organisation is recognised as a social adaptive system that connects, responds to, as well as influences, the complex and dynamic multi-layered social, cultural, political, and economic environments surrounding it. There is unequivocal evidence from the twenty years of research in England that successful school principals play the most crucial role in creating values-driven organisational capacity, conditions, and cultures that enable the school organisation to respond to, adapt to, and thrive amidst internal and external challenges and changes. Schools’ improvement priorities, processes, and outcomes can vary significantly over time, largely dependent on the extent to which principals are able to enact their educational values in ways that develop and enhance organisational systems and practices that are culturally, educationally, and contextually relevant; meaningful; and responsive to the needs of the students and staff as well as of the wider community that the school serves.

Unlike other approaches that occur at the intersection of leadership theories with broader societal explanations (e.g., power distance), the English successful principalship line of research reaches into the details of leadership practices, behaviours, and values from within a perspective of holistic appreciation of their unique combinations, with a focus on the internal agentic drive, i.e., the passion for equity. In this sense, its findings speak to the broader organisational dynamic in all its complexity from a profoundly humanistic perspective.

Drawing on evidence from the review and as an answer to our research question, we have identified three crucial themes. The first invites us to reconceptualise successful leadership as a social phenomenon and make sense of what leaders do and the changes that their leadership brings about within the complex systemic environments in which their school is situated. The second considers the relevance of moral purposes and ecological understandings for a successful principalship. The third is related to grasping a specific integrated dynamic between the personal and the functional, and it is both effectiveness and equity-oriented. In other words, the English research strand has shown that humanistic approaches move from the possibility of having agents inspired by equity visions and human-centric values. They are then able to proceed with realism through the incorporation of pragmatically wise technical solutions. When the functional serves the personal and not vice versa, organisations can engage in a cycle of development phases that organically sustain the functional through the personal.

8.1. Positioning Research on Successful School Leadership in Complexity

The key findings of this English scholarship strand are in line with but go beyond Leithwood and Sun's [34] claim that "improvement requires leaders to enact a wide range of practices" (p. 403). In a nutshell, "values-informed organisational, personal and task-centred strategies and actions" [23] (p. 225) are all required, and according to the evidence from the English research, are not applied in a linear way, but implicitly acknowledge a belief that events in today's world are highly interdependent [35]. Thus, successful leaders' strategies and actions do not reflect linear, atomized, and predictive explanations of the social world in which they live, but are based upon a view of the internal and external worlds as dynamic, emergent, and complex, and that achieving success in their work is dependent on the leadership and management of the interaction of several variables, not all of which can be observed or predicted, but all of which are connected [36]. For researchers, thinking in this way requires a paradigm moving towards a "holistic, connectionist and integrationist view of the individual and the environment, rather than a fragmented, reductionist perspective" [37] (p. 34). Using this way of thinking suggests that successful leaders go beyond, 'rational-scientific' methods, employing "soft skills to foster trust, leverage the power of communities, and involve the whole of society" [38] (p. 353). They, "anticipate, cope, adapt and transform adversity in order to bounce beyond it" [39]. Thinking in this way also challenges those who continue to present single-lens models of successful principalship. Researchers who wish to understand principals' worlds, to identify and unearth underlying patterns of context, actions, and persons, need, therefore, to design research that enables them to access the thinking, emotional, and social worlds of teachers and schools.

What is also required to make sense of leaders and their leadership in research is a spatial and cultural dimension conceptualised as internal and external contexts and their privileged dynamics that are shown to occur from the inside out. Related to this, there is an underlying emphasis on the agency and empowerment of those in leadership positions. This fact is visible in how principals overcome rigid accountability systems and work creatively within and beyond the pre-scripted standards. At the same time, the emphasis on agency combines with a socially realistic approach to the effect of the actual school structures and cultures. Pragmatic and context-relevant actions and behaviours support agentic principals' practices. In addition, a time-sensitive aspect, such as creative choices of strategies best suited to the specific development phase, is also crucial and combines with the spatial one. The values-laden and strategically wise combination and sedimentation of practices and behaviours is conceptualised as a sliding scale and synergetic pattern. In other words, successful principals' actions are, at the same time, space and time-sensitive.

Such a complex paradigm-informed scenario chimes with a social realist perspective on the role of agents, structures, and cultures in organisational change and improvement. This perspective means that transformation "centres upon the causal mechanisms, structures, powers and relations that are the ever-present condition, and the continually reproduced and/or transformed outcome, of human agency" [40] (p. 14). In addition, social agents can act purposefully and consciously or unconsciously and "thereby reproduce, the mechanisms, structures, powers and relations that govern their actions in daily life" [40] (p. 14).

The observations and reflections thus far support the underlying rationale for the use of complexity theory considering that: (i) schools are dynamic, policy influenced, but not determined; (ii) schools are task-driven and relational in their nature; (iii) successful principals are agential, rather than compliant; (iv) progress in school improvement, teachers' teaching, student learning, and achievement is unlikely to follow a smooth, uninterrupted trajectory; but (v) will be subject to ongoing perturbations within and between uneven, complex internal and external interactions within and between micro, meso, macro, exo, and chrono systems [41].

This means looking at a specific phenomenon through the eyes of all of the social actors that co-construct this phenomenon. This enables multiple causalities, multiple

perspectives, and multiple effects to be charted [36]. This conceptualisation of the work of leadership allows a more nuanced understanding of how *successful* principals achieve success, separating it from earlier work internationally which has sought to explain leadership in terms of what has been described as ‘adjectival’ models [42]. By definition, this perspective rejects recipes, formulae, checklists, and singular, generalisable ‘models’ that claim to represent, for example, ‘transformational’ and ‘instructional’ school leadership. It does so by acknowledging the interrelated, often reciprocal nature of human and non-human elements from within and across schools, school systems, and government, which influence the whole [23,43]. Informed by complexity theory, such generalised models would have limited application in practice. Unlike contingency and situational theories, the socio-ecological model of school leadership goes, in fact, beyond mere adjectival leadership theories, whilst identifying the role of instructional leadership as a key component in carefully pondered combinations with transformational practices. Robust empirical data has led to ‘successful’ leadership as “‘layering’ [21] of ‘fit for purpose’ combinations and accumulations of within phase leadership strategies and actions over time through the enactment of principals’ personal and professional values and visions and in response to careful diagnosis and multiple and sometimes conflicting communities of interest” [23] (p. 225).

In conceptual terms, this body of scholarship showed that the phases of school improvement are related to how and why some leadership actions are contextually appropriate at a given point in time; and those values-driven combined practices enable schools to develop capacity and achieve intermediate successes that are essential for them to move on to the next phase of school improvement. This gradual process revealed overlaps of leadership practices in-between and across phases, which implies “layering the foundation for the next phase”.

8.2. Moral Purposes and Ecological Understandings of Equity

The moral purpose in schools as organisations coincides with the personal, which means a commitment to support the flourishing of all those involved, students and teachers alike. There is a risk that the personal dimension gets corrupted in the name of a managerialism and technicist enterprise, working to alight competition and thus ultimately producing alienation. A perverse effect of shallow person-centred learning and school is the reinforcement of cycles of soulless technicism and neoliberal performativity. The radical critics of such blunt managerialism have ironically accused the so-called “soulful turn” [44] of invoking the personal for the sake of the functional perversely. In other words, what appears to be a surplus of soul, as personalised education or superficial recalling of school values, is revealed to be, in essence, the absence of the soul, the predominance of the functional over the personal. Postfoundational scholars have rallied against performativity, too. Similarly, the struggle of the soul, as Popkewitz [45] suggests, has to do with the less-than-human regimes in which teachers observe, supervise, and evaluate children. In so doing, they produce norms that exclude children who are poor and of colour. In the same vein, Mills and colleagues [46] have also emphasised the risks that personalisation implies.

The English research on successful school leadership is authentically imbued with a passion for equity that is person-centred at a deeper level. The prevalence of the personal begins from the awareness of such successful principals. Their own biographies drive them to engage with the success of all of their children and their school communities in a passionate and profoundly humanistic manner. The personal aspect is then at work in their care for the single student and the most marginalised and poor communities. The distinctive element in the English successful school leadership research strand includes the functional and subsequent transformation under the power of emotional and moral elements. Positively disrupting school cultures engenders uncertainties, not chaos. The endeavour to turn around an unsuccessful school in a deprived community can be

accomplished through the disruption of dysfunctional cultures and setting high expectations for the future of the organisation [2].

The contextual understanding of a school's internal and external conditions builds upon a technical capacity to read the context and a moral drive for improvement and change of the school as a community and of the broader external community of parents. The personal moral and emotional commitment to equity becomes professional when capacities are at work and bring them together. Moreover, the personal dimension manifests as competent and versatile successful leadership practices when values and actions are effectively aligned. At the other end of the continuum, functional and effective leadership occurs when creativity supports those technical skills and capacities supporting the complex strategies of leading for improvement. The sliding scales of internal and external contexts and the synergetic layering of practices are never just functional as a substance. They deeply integrate human agency most creatively: it is not a matter of standardisation, repetition, or compliance but of innovative thinking and foresight capacities. The passion for success is a moral drive for the flourishing of each and all students: this means personal progress and wellbeing, which are broader aims compared to the actual achievement scores. Portraits of successful English principals clearly show that the passion for success is foremost a passion for personal success in life. This holistic accomplishment goes beyond the cognitive to embrace the emotional and the moral.

Whilst acknowledging the more tokenistic policy indications of success, such principals can incorporate the government guidelines in more vital and broader aims, forecasting the professional and personal future of their students. A moral and affective dimension of successful principalship is at the heart of communities inside and outside the school as an organisation. What can be perceived as inhuman accountability regimes imposed on schools by the government are locally transformed into deeply internalised moral values. The emotional dimension can provide vision and place principals ahead of policy in a contradictory way. Their interpretations recreate and alter those external indications in personal and professional community pillars that are freely assumed. Personal biographies of successful principals fuel an optimistic approach to enhancing the internal moral and material resources, placing the locus of transformation at the level of the school as a community. Thus, it can expand towards the larger community of parents, most frequently made of poor, marginalised households. In line with Fielding's [18] perspective, such leaders can apply a deeply radical communitarian approach to their internal and external communities: collective, constructivism efforts bring together professionals, parents, and students, recognise their voices, revise the structures and go beyond mere external accountability measures. Student learning is at the heart of the moral purpose, skilfully aligning internal conditions and external effects. Personalised education is then authentically reinvented in its humanistic meanings and implemented as localised configurations that can support and enhance people's capabilities.

8.3. When the Functional Serves the Personal and the Moral Purpose, the Humanistic Potential Is Unleashed

The functional and the humanistic dimensions have been long applied in social sciences to classify and distinguish approaches. The part versus the whole, the structure versus the agency, and the objective versus the subjective are very broad simplifications of their ontological stances. Such major paradigms present internal ramifications, mainly as the individual versus the collective, leading to individualistic as much as collectivistic positions. Although radical positions are still focused on the individual, they assume societal change as their ultimate aim. More importantly, the social cartography tradition in education [47] shows the overlapping and intermediary complex positions that can occur despite functionalism and humanism are clearly distinguishable. In this sense, it maps the complex and overlapping relations between different discursive communities with applications to any policy issue (e.g., personalisation, see [48]). For example, Fielding's position concerning personalised education is that of a radical humanist, proposing prefigurative

practice based on democratic experimentalism, a radical curriculum, and an enabling assessment. While acknowledging a government policy (i.e., personalised education) in England and its functionalist approach, Fielding urges the practitioners to draw upon a robust moral tradition (Macmurray's philosophical thought). In his view, we enter into a personal relationship with others because it is through them that we can be and become ourselves [18].

The discussion of this government policy allows Fielding to conceptualise his position about what the personal stands for: democratic fellowship, unscripted professionalism, radical collegiality, and relationships with students, if we consider his previous works on 'students' voice' [49]. The functional has no place inside his vision about schooling and education because no standards are required in his radical humanistic vision. However, Fielding acknowledges the potential of a government policy while lamenting what he sees as a lack of the ontological as personal anchoring.

The humanistic approach identified in the English research on successful leadership does not exclude the tools provided by functionalist strands of research but finds that successful change for improvement emerges from the personal, the biography, the emotion, and the commitment for equity of principals and their possibility to shape communities or practice and instil values and vision from a democratic fellowship posture. In other words, layering leadership practices is effective only if it is a tool to serve disadvantaged communities. A complexity theory precisely recognises the prevalence of intangible moral and affective domains over the use and order of those tools. Those functionalist devices gain power and produce their effects within a humanistic and person-centric framework. Not everything can be replicated or pre-scripted without the human factor. More significant is that in challenging circumstances, the use, number, and order of adoption of functionalist-informed strategies are higher, more complex, and more intense. Such a design complexity cannot entirely derive from mere cognitive competencies. Instead, it is a consequence of the passion for equity and commitment to the personal dimension, and it is a product of a highly creative and unscripted effort.

9. Conclusions

Following Fielding [18], our analysis has distinguished between humanistic and functional approaches to leadership practices. The English research tradition on successful school principals requires a specific combination of tools from both spectrums. However, the humanistic perspective is essential to successful leadership in disadvantaged communities. This review of this research strand highlights the pre-eminence of humanistic values in successful school principals' work and their strong moral purposes, strategies, and actions in navigating internal and external relationships. This paper provides a detailed analysis of the impact of internal and external school contexts and leadership behaviours and attitudes, as related to their passion and commitment to serving disadvantaged communities, leadership practices, and the dynamic nature of improvement leading to success. One major finding is that successful leaders in these English case studies address policy challenges mostly in divergent and creative ways. Their strategies are closely related to the capacity to improve the internal environment—a key ingredient of school improvement in the difficult circumstances of deprived communities. In particular, they draw upon powerful emotional and highly energising behaviours, known as a 'passion for success'. Such behaviours and attitudes prove to be indispensable to equity-oriented leadership for success. In terms of practices, a practical wisdom principle of doing the contextually understood 'right things in the right order' has emerged. In addition, in order to sustain the complex dynamics of school improvement, a 'layering of leadership' actions have emerged, indicating an implicit ecologically based understanding of their work as taking place in schools, which themselves exist as complex adaptive organisations within a larger dynamic social ecology in which different layers interact. This suggests that existing models of leadership (e.g., instructional and transformational), whilst contributing to knowledge, cannot fully represent the complexity of successful leaders' work and lives.

We have argued that policy challenges can be addressed by a ‘passion for success’ posture, creativity, and even policy-divergent actions. Finely tuned contextual understanding of the internal environment is vital to promoting improvements and addressing external context challenges. Successful leaders incorporate and go beyond a functional, human capital view of education, mainly through carefully chosen leadership practices, adopted in what principals discern is the ‘right order’ and as layering aspects that overlap and combine effectively, well aware of the complexity of capabilities development and school improvement. We can conclude that a humanistic potential is unleashed and intensified when the vision and the direction are personal and the functional is a secondary element whose aim is to serve best not just the tasks and concrete achievements but also the holistic, long-life personal and academic growth and wellbeing.

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