

Background paper prepared for the
2024/5 Global Education Monitoring Report

Leadership in education

Educational research and the quality of successful school leadership

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the International Successful School Principalship Project's (ISSPP) contribution to the 2024/5 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report on leadership and education which examines: i) the requirements of good leadership in education and how they vary over time; ii) the visions and goals that are driving leadership in education; and iii) through what practices the exercise of leadership contributes to better education outcomes.

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1. The Context

There are five on-going challenges faced by governments concerning educational access and the quality of school education: i) fostering equity and inclusion in education – a global concern stressed by the United Nations in its fourth Sustainable Development Goal, to ‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (United Nations, 2023); ii) difficulties in attracting students to attend school; iii) engaging students in school-based learning; iv) attracting, training, and retaining well qualified, committed teachers, especially in rural schools; and v) failures in many countries in attempts to ‘close’ the attainment gap between the socio-economically advantaged and socio-economically disadvantaged students.

Whilst governments in all countries continue to generate policies in attempts to resolve these challenges, for example, through the production of principal and teacher standards, the provision of innovative teacher preparation and induction programmes, and increased emphases upon in-service teacher support, principal recruitment and selection, by and large their success in impacting quality has varied. Moreover, whilst such government policies recognize the importance to school success of the quality of the principal (Leithwood et al., 2007), and many have examined the role played by principal values, dispositions, personal resources, strategies, and relationships in this, few have examined their combined strengths in contributing together over time to school success, or the ways in which they do so.

Research on school leadership has produced disparate findings and has been limited in its influence on policy and practice. To date, dominant strands have provided: i) time limited ‘snapshots’ of schools, resulting from surveys and/or interviews and observations conducted over a short period; ii) secondary data syntheses constructed from the primary empirical work of others; iii) generalized ‘adjectival’ models with contrasting titles that claim to represent particularly ‘effective’ leadership styles; iv) econometrically oriented analyses of large scale quantitative data sets; and v) small scale, self-reported narratives of selected principals, sometimes triangulated with reports from staff members. Researchers across these areas of study often draw from different literatures, use different methodologies, and adopt research instruments that they regard as being the most pertinent and best fulfil their research purposes and/or available resources.

Another research strand is conducted by ‘critical theorists’, who suggest that the emphasis in ideologically driven government led education reform has been to increase organizational efficiency through the active promotion of ‘performativity’, ‘results-driven’ teacher accountability that has led to: i) an emphasis in schools on ‘functionality’ as observed in ‘teaching to the test’ (Apple, 2012) and ii) a creeping ‘technicisation’ of teacher professionalism and an increase in ‘managerialism’; and that: iii) these have led to crises in teacher stress, burnout and attrition (Boylan, et al., 2023). Whilst the pace of this drift to functionality has been different in different countries, the direction has been the same. Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that *those schools which are regarded as achieving success do so as a direct result of the quality of their leadership, especially that of their principals.*

2. The Research Warrant

The ISSPP research reported in this paper, written as an invited contribution to UNESCO, acknowledges the contributions of these different research strands to understandings of the complex nature of school leadership, but also suggests that the theoretical and empirical bases for these have been insufficiently nuanced, and no longer provide a 'best fit' for understanding not only the 'what' of successful principals' and other leaders' practices in maximizing opportunities for the teachers, teaching, learning and achievement of all in the changing and challenging environments of schools, but also the 'how', 'when' and 'why'.

The ISSPP's longstanding commitment to researching successful school leadership is of particular policy and practice importance in the current context when 'our world is at a unique juncture in history characterised by increasingly uncertain and complex trajectories shifting at an unprecedented speed. ... Yet education has the most transformational potential to shape just and sustainable futures' (UNESCO *The Futures of Education*, 2021). Although schools alone cannot address many of the centuries' old issues of educational and social inequalities that still challenge many children's fundamental right to quality education in modern times, they are spaces where knowledgeable, committed, and caring teachers are dedicated to inspiring the learning and achievement of young minds. For children from socioeconomically disadvantaged and socioculturally marginalized communities, schools led by successful principals offer hope and promise to realize the transformational potential that quality education can bring about for them.

The contents of this paper provide a robust, internationally informed research perspective, complementing the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report findings in general, and providing a specific focus on principal success – *what success means, how this relates to educational purposes, and how principals build and sustain the success of their schools, as they navigate the complex external and internal environments in which they and their colleagues work*. The paper takes its warrant from the results of multi-layered, multi-perspective research in schools located in a range of geographical and socio-economic settings, which has been conducted by members of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) in more than 25 countries over the last two decades (Sun, et al., 2023). The paper provides selected findings from existing peer reviewed publications, syntheses of the key purposes, values, personal qualities, and practices of principals that have led to sustained success in primary (elementary) and secondary (junior, middle and senior high) in state schools, in individual countries, serving communities with different socio-economic characteristics across all five continents of the world.

As far as we know, this project is the largest, most methodologically coherent, and comprehensive ongoing study of successful school principalship. The researchers have examined principals' purposes, qualities, and practices as reported by themselves and a range of internal and external stakeholders as they navigate broad national, cultural, and policy contexts through their selection and use of combinations of values-led context sensitive, actions over time,

and create, build and sustain multiple sets of external and internal, individual and socially productive relationships that lead to success.

In order to achieve this, the ISSPP research design is based upon six interlocking strands:

- Locating success in humanistic educational purposes.
- Enacting education policy: principled improvement.
- Building success synergistically: phases of improvement.
- Recognizing that contexts matter but do not dictate.
- Leading change for the good: the power of agency.
- Navigating uncertain environments: ecological human systems theory.

The paper will engage briefly with each of these, provide six ‘vignettes’ from different member countries, and end with a research-informed consideration of the implications of the findings of this substantial body of research for the (re-)formulation of policy direction and principal preparation, recruitment, selection, and retention appropriate to the global educational needs of the twenty-first century.

2.1. Locating success in humanistic educational purposes

The ISSPP research is conducted with experienced principals who are deemed to have achieved success over at least a consecutive three-year period, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative success indicators, for example, tests and examinations, reputation, school inspection. Thus, successful principals are defined as those who attend, with their teachers, to the broad moral, social, and ethical issues related to the cognitive, affective, social and critical thinking dimensions that add value to the education of all students, as well as achieving excellence in academic tests and examinations, regardless of socio-economic and linguistic diversity, in the knowledge that different contexts may challenge the use of absolute measures.

The research findings have revealed that success is achieved regardless of the systems of governance, geographies, and the socio-economic state of the communities that they serve, by principals whose work encompasses four core functions of education: ‘fulfilment – to the individual; integration – into society; economic – preparing an individual for an economic role; and custodial – relieving parents from child rearing duties (Birks et al., 2013, p.3). How principals enact these in practice is always based on the quality and timing of their judgements of combined the needs of the students, their parents, and policy demands, their ‘pro tem’ assessments of the school’s phase of development, their ambition to move forward, to foster hope among teachers, students, and parent communities, and their ability to ‘disturb’ existing embedded norms of behaviour and the values which underpin ‘how we do things around here’, in order to ‘enable a new way of knowing, doing and achieving for children and young people in their schools which may be different from those that have become the norm’ (Mincu et al., 2024).

Successful principals’ work is informed by a clear set of broad humanistic values and principles that reflect, ‘the pre-ordinance of the personal over the functional’ (Fielding, 2012, cited in Mincu et al., 2024). Thus, *while what policy makers often refer to as the work of ‘effective’ principals, primarily in terms of what students’ success as measured*

by performance on national tests and examinations, the ISSPP criteria for success include but go beyond this. They are based on an empirically founded definition of 'successful' school leadership, located in a humanistic, 'person over function' perspective (Fielding, 2012), as these principals acknowledge, embrace and navigate complexity. Whilst the research work of ISSPP does not directly challenge critics' concerns over the potentially negative influences of the policy environments in which principals and their colleagues work, its research on successful principals finds that these environments do not prevent success from being achieved and sustained.

2.2. Enacting education policy: principled improvement

External policy initiatives, whether they are foreground or background noises that schools can or cannot ignore, represent some, but not all, of the many demands, challenges, and opportunities that schools face in their everyday working worlds. Although these initiatives are seen by governments as a means of building human, economic, and social capital in increasingly competitive and socially turbulent global environments, there are continuing concerns over attempts by school leaders and teachers to implement them in ways that appear to be manifestly unlikely to work (e.g. Gu et al., 2021; Payne, 2008).

The ISSPP research does not engage with the political and sociological debates about the pedagogical challenges, professional tensions, and ethical dilemmas that education policies and reforms have produced for school leaders and teachers (e.g., Fuhrman, 1999; Mitchell et al., 2011; Payne, 2008). *Rather, we have found that the political, professional, and accountability pressures created by incoherent, disjointed, and at times contradictory external policy initiatives are part of the broad environments in which 'schools and education policy subsist' (Cohen et al., 2007, p.526) in many systems.* Whilst some schools not only survive but also continue to thrive in the face of challenging and changing environments, others struggle and falter.

2.3. Leading change for the good: the power of agency

The ISSPP generated research knowledge shows that principals in improving and successful schools do not compromise or sacrifice broader educational purposes, can beat the odds, and do enable their teachers and students to achieve and thrive – both individually and collectively – in the face of considerable, continuing and at times, disruptive external policy demands (Day et al., 2016; Day and Leithwood, 2007; Day et al., 2011; Day and Gu, 2018). The insight from such knowledge is that schools continuing to thrive in the reform process are 'active agents' (Hubbard et al., 2006, p. 14) who reshape policy initiatives into actions that are culturally, organizationally and educationally meaningful to their teachers and students in their daily realities. Put differently, how these schools respond to and do policy is 'an act of co-construction' (Hubbard et al., 2006, p. 14), *enactment* in context, rather than *implementation* with fidelity (Gu, 2023).

Successful policy enactment is therefore, in essence, about leading and managing change and continued school enablement (Gu, Sammons & Chen, 2018). A key defining aspect of principal leadership is an unrelenting focus on fostering consistent values, expectations and standards, and through these, empowering and transforming staff capacities and organizational conditions to embrace change and improvement. In successful schools, the process of

policy enactment and the process of school improvement are not two separate processes, but one intertwined process of school enablement in which external policy initiatives and internal school improvement practices are purposefully aligned by principals to serve their moral purposes, educational values, and goals for the school. At the heart of this intertwined, interlocking process are continuous leadership efforts to support collaborative professional learning and development and, through this, to build the whole-school capacity necessary for sustainable personal, social, and academic improvement in student outcomes. Kotter (1996) argues that although managing change is challenging, the much better challenge for most organizations is 'leading change' (1996, p. 30).

Evidence from the ISSPP research shows that in successful schools, what the leaders appear to be doing exceptionally well is using policies and reforms as opportunities for change purposefully, progressively, and strategically to(re)generate collaborative and coherent cultures and conditions which encourage and support the staff to learn, to reflect, and to renew their practice (Gu et al., 2018).

2.4. Building success synergistically: phases of improvement in schools

Achieving and sustaining success entails a journey of change and improvement in which successful principals apply contextually sensitive combinations of leadership practices and strategies to mediate the influence of the relative advantage/disadvantage of the communities from which their students are drawn. Key in this regard are the ways in which principals apply leadership practices – not the practices themselves – that demonstrate responsiveness to the contexts in which they work (Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016). They also demonstrate their ability to lead and manage successfully and to overcome the extreme challenges of the high need contexts in which some of them work. *Success, then, is built through the synergistic effects of the combination and accumulation of different leadership strategies and practices that are related to the principals' judgement about what works in their particular contexts and at a point in time.*

This approach to researching leadership success has enabled the ISSPP scholars to identify clear and interrelated phases of schools' improvement trajectories that reflect the nature and intensity of challenges embedded in schools' external and internal contexts and the degree of success that principals have led their schools to achieve in responding to and managing these challenges. The conceptualization and identification of phases of school improvement focuses on how and why some leadership actions are contextually more appropriate than others at a point in time. Together, and over time, these actions are able, individually and in combination, to make a difference to aspects of school improvement processes, enabling schools to develop capacity and achieve intermediate success platforms that are essential for them to move on to the next phases of school improvement (Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016).

The ISSPP research has identified four broad school improvement phases – foundational, developmental, enrichment, and renewal phases – reflecting the dynamic as well as continuous nature of improvement in schools over time. Whilst each phase may vary in length, some leadership practices and strategies are important across phases,

achievements in an earlier phase of school improvement lay a necessary foundation for continued improvement effort in the next phase.

2.5. Contexts matter but do not dictate.

Much has been written about the high degree of sensitivity that successful leaders bring to the contexts in which they work. Some would go so far as to claim that ‘context is everything.’ However, the ISSPP research suggests that this is a superficial view of who successful leaders and what they do – because although they are sensitive to rather than dictated by context, this does not mean that they use qualitatively different practices in every different context (Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016). This is also a superficial view of how school contexts matter to leadership and improvement – because the school context is, in itself, not static. The conceptualization of school improvement phases invites us to analyze context as a dynamic phenomenon which encompasses the interaction between space, defined by the external social, cultural and socioeconomic environments of the school and its internal organizational capacity, cultures and conditions, and time, related to the level of maturity (or readiness) of the school to achieve their mission and goals on their improvement journey (Gu & Johansson, 2012).

Experiences of many ISSPP successful principals show that it is through ‘layering’ (Day et al., 2011) their leadership strategies over time that they are able to progressively shape the culture of their schools and develop the collective capacity to enable change to be implemented and improvement to be sustained. The key to success lies in their ability to identify and diagnose problems as well as strengths in an appropriate, responsive, and immediate manner and build tomorrow’s success on today’s progress and achievements.

2.6. Navigating uncertain environments: ecological human systems theory

Drawing on complexity theory (Morrison, 2010) and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), ISSPP research is based upon a view of contemporary schools as ‘complex, adaptive systems’ (McKelvey, 2004) with complexity defined as a feature of a system that arises as a result of the interactions of the individual components of the system. This implies that the behavior of the system cannot be lowered to the total behavior of its constituent elements (Dekker et al., 2011) but rather considers fluid components and the relations between them. Complexity science provides a useful segway between the abstractions of complexity theory, by focusing on ‘order creation’ rather than ‘order equilibrium’. (McKelvey, 2004:316). Essentially, this is what ISSPP aspires to achieve.

ISSPP research recognizes education and its nuanced processes, practices, and outcomes in relation to layered systems of influence. Each of these ecological systems inevitably interact with and influence each other. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model organizes these as five layered systems of influence: Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem and Chronosystem. His theory suggests that the microsystem is the smallest and most immediate environment (the classroom). The mesosystem encompasses the interaction of the different microsystems in which teachers and students find themselves (the school). The exosystem pertains to the linkages that may exist between two or more settings. Such places and people may include home and school workplaces. The macrosystem is the largest and most distant collection of people and places that still have significant influences on

all those in school (policy). The chronosystem adds the dimension of time to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. It demonstrates the influence of both change and constancy in the school environments.

This conceptualisation informs the design, analysis, and interpretations of the ISSPP empirical work, because it accurately represents the complex environments with which principals interact on a daily basis, and which successful principals navigate successfully in taking forward their humanistic educational agenda. This enables ISSPP researchers to drill further into the dynamic, context-related interactions between the time-sensitive applications of the values, qualities, dispositions, capabilities, relationships and skills of school principals who achieve success; and how these principals apply strategies in different ways, at different times, and in different combinations in managing changing external and internal challenges. Its members' research has also found that whilst cultures differ in different national jurisdictions, successful principals' values and purposes and change for improvement strategies are broadly similar.

For school leadership researchers, thinking in this way signals a paradigm shift from a fragmented, reductionist perspective, towards an 'holistic, connectionist and integrationist view of the individual and the environment' (Youngblood, 1997, p.34) which embraces ecological systems theory, which itself draws upon complexity theory. The underlying rationale for this is a view that: i) schools are dynamic, policy influenced but not determined; ii) task driven and relational in their nature; iii) successful principals are agential, rather than compliant; iv) progress in school improvement, teachers' teaching and student learning and achievement is unlikely to indicate a smooth, uninterrupted trajectory; but v) will be subject to ongoing, uneven, complex interactions within different layers of the larger system. Thus, school leaders are a group of people who are part of a profession, part of a school organization that is also part of the whole educational system, that is part of a country's cultural heritage, all of which has to be understood temporally. The system affects the environment, and the environment affects the system. Using this way of thinking suggests that successful leaders go beyond, 'rational-scientific' methods, employing so called 'soft skills to foster trust, build learning communities within and beyond the school, as they 'anticipate, cope, adapt and transform adversity in order to bounce beyond it' (Menzies & Raskovic, 2020).

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.

3. Success in Leading Schools Serving High Need Communities: Six Vignettes

3.1. Vignette 1 Poland: Successful Principalship in Polish Schools Serving High Need Communities: A Case of Inclusion (Edited extract from Madalińska-Michalak, 2024)

'In our school we pay attention to leaders acting as role models, and leadership qualities that help teachers feel valued, and do the right things for education of our children... Our

school principal is the best example of acting as a role model for us. She helped us to see the value of collaborative culture at the school to learn from each other and work in teams to change the school.' (Sonia, The Principal)

The Context

This Polish school, with 51 teachers, was attended by 548 students from Year 7-15, more than 60% from socio-economically disadvantaged homes, and included 34 students from the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Prior to the appointment of the current principal, the school was perceived as failing, to which mainly from the poor families' children were sent. The school principal, Sonia, had been in post for seven years. During that time, she had placed a strong emphasis on such values as care, respect for persons, relationships, wellbeing, creativity, collaboration, solidarity, inclusion, and equity. Students' academic achievements had improved significantly. Teachers saw the principal as a person who looked out for their personal welfare, who trusted them to do their jobs well and who encouraged them to participate actively in school decision-making processes. They referred to the need to draw on the assets of children and avoid a 'deficit model'. Their priorities were to provide exciting learning opportunities for children, meeting their individual needs, and creating flexible and innovative learning spaces. The school had become a hub of the local community where parents were valued as partners in their children's learning.

The Case: Keeping All Children 'Hooked in to Learning'

Sonia (the principal) spoke of inclusive teaching 'involving students fully in the process of learning, be inspired and engaged, even during the COVID-19 pandemic when learning had to take part in the students' homes and in virtual spaces'. She said that she wanted to 'keep children hooked into learning'. She believed that a key role for school leaders is to 'guarantee that there is good quality teaching in every classroom, no matter if it is in the time of COVID-19 or another time'. To ensure this, 'teachers as leaders modelled and encouraged both rigour and inspiration, underpinned by positive relationships with pupils and their families'.

Sonia stressed that one of the priorities in the school was to implement curriculum innovations, to 'personalise learning,' to include more disadvantaged children in the process of education in multicultural classrooms through developing 'a need for learning', and 'being together'. Teachers in the school regarded children from disadvantaged communities as 'assets' who could be drawn upon as powerful resources for teaching and learning, who could be treated as partners in the learning enterprise, rather than 'problems'. Greater co-operation between schools and children's families, 'including parents can help children to overcome the current barriers to learning' was especially important in the cases of more vulnerable students, who did not have the necessary conditions at home to learn.

'As a school leader I have to have an inclusive vision where teachers, parents and pupils are brought on board with a commitment to learning and development. Therefore, I would like to see my school as a place where we work even closer with parents. This could help us to have more flexible and creative approach to learning and meeting individual needs...

without parents, without shared aims and values, children will not to be included effectively in the learning process.' (Sonia, The Principal)

The Learning

This extract from a longer ISSPP case study (Madalinska-Michalak, 2024) reveals how the success of a school serving pupils drawn largely from disadvantaged communities was built and sustained by a school principal over a seven-year period, through establishing an inclusive curriculum in classrooms, in partnership with children's families, and, alongside these, promoting teachers' motivation, commitment, engagement in decision-making, and professional development. The findings in this 'vignette', provide strong evidence that successful school principalship, especially in schools serving high need communities, demands the development and implementation of a combination and accumulation of fit for purpose strategies by principals which demonstrate a strong belief in social justice, expressed through the active inclusion of all stakeholders in pupils' learning, a clear, well-articulated sense of purpose, resilience, and, most of all, an on-going ethic of care and compassion.

3.2. Vignette 2 USA: Successful USA Inclusive Principalship in a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse School Serving a High-Needs Students Near the US-Mexico border (Edited extract from Ylimaki et al., 2023)

The Context

Historically, U.S.A. schools have been part of a highly decentralized system with education authority allocated to each of 50 states. In the past two decades, national policies have shifted toward curriculum centralization (common core) and externalized evaluations, but education is still a state responsibility. At the same time, student demographics have become increasingly diverse in Arizona and in many other states due to global population migrations, refugees, and internal demographic shifts. In other words, today's U.S.A principals must navigate new and perennial tensions between commonality and diversity.

The Case

El Median Elementary School is about 100 miles from the US-Mexico border in a rural area known for mining and agriculture with multiple generations of students attending the school. The principal is Leah Johnson, an Anglo woman in her late 50s. She is fluent in Spanish from her experiences in the Peace Corps in Latin America. The school has 22 teachers for 377 students from Pre-Kindergarten to fifth grade. Over 50% of students are from socio-economically disadvantaged homes, including 12% second language learners/students who recently migrated from Mexico.

Principal Johnson has served as principal of El Median for over ten years. During her tenure as principal, Leah Johnson placed a strong emphasis on collaboration, belonging, quality teaching, and learning with evidence for these. When she began her tenure as principal, the school performed below the state standard on state assessments. She gradually developed new structures for professional learning and leadership in which teachers would share new ideas for teaching, learn about the strengths of diverse cultures, and use data as a source of

reflection. In her words, ‘We look at data, identify problems, and make plans for improvement together.’ Principal Johnson and the teachers talked about the importance of parent relationships and recognition to curriculum and instructional improvement. As one teacher described, ‘We have after school activities where we as teachers learn from parents. We see the strengths and value of multicultural curriculum and the students’ funds of knowledge and dual language skills related to the curriculum.’ Further, the school provided activities for those students who did not have the parent or family support at home.

Leadership for Culture, Belonging, and Learning

Students who recently moved to the school from Mexico made comments about how the teachers and principal helped them relate the curriculum to their own cultural backgrounds. Likewise, parents noted that students belong, learn, and achieve. A parent’s description was typical of many others when she stated, ‘When you go into El Median, you know there is good teaching going on and that the students are happy learning. It is a place where children feel like they belong, and they can excel.’ Moreover, parents, students, teachers, and the principal talked about the school as a place where children loved learning.

Leadership Agency to Influence Systems

Principal Johnson believed in teacher leadership to foster and sustain belonging and learning. Leah modelled good teaching in classrooms and frequently supported new migrant students with her Spanish language skills. She purposely balanced curriculum and testing policy expectations with increasingly diverse cultural knowledge from new students. She used her agency and navigated student needs and strengths in relation to requirements from the district, state, and beyond. Principal Leah Johnson frequently offered parent education sessions to learn about the home cultures and to help parents support learning at home. Leah Johnson’s education efforts in her leadership often extended to the district and even state level as she made presentations about the school. Teacher leaders often conducted professional development sessions for other teachers at El Median as well as other teachers in the district.

Principal Johnson felt confident in her ability to mediate, navigate, and influence these systems. At the same time, she acknowledged that leadership amidst the contemporary changes contributed to her own growth as a leader.

‘I can see where we in the school have educated and changed the community about what is needed for diverse students to excel in their learning. I also think that these changes have changed me and helped me grow as a leader.’ (Johnson, The Principal)

The Learning

This vignette from a longer ISSPP case study (Ylimaki, et al., 2023) reveals how the success of a school serving increasingly diverse students was attained and sustained by a principal over a ten-year period. Over a ten-year period, the principal established an inclusive school culture for teachers, students, and parents. Principal Leah Johnson worked with and through teachers to develop curriculum changes that contributed to learning and

achievement. Changes featured culturally responsive teaching with recognition for the strengths of culture and language. Principal Johnson was an educational leader who taught and learned from parents and community members as well as district and state leaders. She worked with and through teachers to analyse data and use it as a source of reflection. Teachers, parents, and students expressed a sense of belonging that supported learning, growth, and academic achievement. Drawing on the ISSPP framing and methodology, findings illustrate that successful school principalship, particularly in schools with rapidly changing demographics, features an inclusive school culture, trusting relationships with parents and community members, teacher leadership capacity, and culturally responsive teaching that connects students' cultures, languages, and life experiences with what they learn in school.

3.3. Vignette 3 Australia: Developing Leadership Capability: Low Socioeconomic Does Not Mean Low Achievement (Edited extract from Gurr et al., 2018)

'He's totally focused on building the capacity of his leaders. He really believes that that's the number one thing.'

The Context

Northern College (pseudonym) is a multi-campus coeducational government school born from the amalgamation of three former failing schools in a northern suburb of Melbourne, Victoria. Student absences were high (over 35 days average absence), enrolments were low and declining, and learning outcomes very low with students on average two years behind in literacy and numeracy expectations. Northern College consists of two Year 7-9 campuses and a Year 10-12 campus. Both Year 7-9 campuses share their sites with a local primary school. The amalgamation of the three schools was to turnaround the suburb's entrenched educational reputation of having schools with low expectations and achievement, and to attract local students back to their local secondary school. Northern College serves a community with many needs and challenges; 74 per cent of its students come from a non-English speaking background and the school ranks in the 16th percentile of all schools in Australia for educational advantage.

The Case

The appointment of an executive principal, the first of its kind in Victoria, to Northern College from outside of the three amalgamated schools was symbolic of the need for change. Peter, the executive principal, grew up in the local area and was intimately aware of the social disadvantage that existed. This experience, and his leadership expertise, were important for the new school to establish a high expectation culture not constrained by circumstance. Peter's focus, to bring about whole school change, was directed towards building the leadership capacity of his staff to enact what was required to form a new college made up of three failing schools with disenchanted staff and students who were not use to high performance. System generated student and staff opinion surveys from these schools indicated that students and staff were not satisfied with their schools, with the results across a range of areas well below state averages.

Changing the Culture

Peter's core values centred on his relentless pursuit of quality education, and strong moral purpose to do the best for students. Peter's belief that every child deserves a rewarding education was evident in his catch cry of, 'low socioeconomic does not mean low achievement.' This phrase echoed through his leadership team as he went about building their leadership capacity to lead school improvement. By improving basic behaviour like student attendance, Peter was clearly trying to create a community that valued education and which shared the responsibility for every student's learning. This was enhanced by building the capacity of his senior and middle leaders to support the changes necessary for school improvement to happen. These changes helped improve the perception of the school, starting from those that matter most, the students. From the broad group of students interviewed for the research, all of them aspired to make a difference to others and/or enhance their opportunities in life, but in the past the school wasn't good at supporting them; the proportion of students being offered a tertiary place grew from 63 to 98% during Peter's five-year tenure.

When Peter was appointed to the school, he understood that it was important to establish a clear school improvement direction. Peter demonstrated directive leadership to establish a high expectation culture and a physically and emotionally safe environment for all. He also focused on developing a strong leadership team, and distributing leadership ever more widely as the capacity of staff grew. Coaching, and targeted learning opportunities facilitated by internal and external personnel provided the necessary capacity building. Peter's approach to school improvement was unrelenting.

The focus on building leadership capacity was ultimately to improve the conditions for teaching and learning. The development of Curriculum Design Teams (CDT) supported the need for a whole-school focus on teaching, learning and assessment approaches. These teams, each with their own leading teacher, created a guaranteed and viable curriculum that could then support the teaching practices of staff and promote appropriate assessment practices, such as moderation between teachers. Through the CDT, peer coaching and observations were an expectation, leading to stronger collaborative practices and a culture of relentless improvement. Such a culture built a shared belief amongst the staff that they could implement the change that was required to better the opportunities for the students:

'I think the belief that we can, and do, make a difference is one that has certainly changed the school. The culture that Peter has created is something that has been a focus of our meetings where we look at what we are trying to create and how are we going to create it.'

(Assistant Principal 2)

The Learning

A consistent feature of the Australian cases in ISSPP is how the successful principals have emphasised and prioritised the development of teachers, school leaders and others. Peter understood the need for establishing a clear and high expectation direction and one of his mottos was '2 for 1', emphasising that the school needed to support students to catch-up on their learning (showing 2 years of learning growth for every year at the school), so that by the time

they left school they were closer to the state average in terms of learning outcomes. All staff participated in collaborative coaching sessions, where they got together with two other staff and in a period taken from each of their teaching loads, they would visit each other's classroom and help each other to develop their teaching practice; giving teachers a period allowance cost several hundred thousand dollars for a staff of over 100, but Peter considered this money well spent.

3.4. Vignette 4 Spain: Successful School Principals in Disadvantaged Contexts (Edited extract from Moral, 2024)

'This (new) principal is a chess player who observes the play and eventually takes part... the presence of the other (previous) principal was more visible (in the corridor, at the door...). He had everything under control.'

The Context

In Spain, education is centralized, and the principal is conceived as the public authority of the school. The principal is not conceived from an authoritarian and power-driven perspective to manage the school. The educational improvement policy in Spain considers the school the basic unit of improvement and the school leadership its ally (Bolívar, 2013). The agency of the school principal is important to navigate a series of external factors, including economic challenges as well as laws and policy requirements. Educational laws and changes in the regulations enacted by the educational administration can be highlighted as determining factors in the performance of these professionals. To work in disadvantaged contexts and promote social justice, the pedagogy of mere transmission and reproduction of knowledge is rejected. Education is chosen from the Freirian approach of critical pedagogy (Murillo & Hernández-Castilla, 2014) as well as a model training based on competencies (Bolívar, 2012), adopted by the Spanish educational system since the proposal of the OECD (2004). In education for social justice, it is recommended to guarantee disadvantaged students the key competencies that allow them to acquire basic learning to correct the unequal effects of meritocratic systems (Bolívar, 2012). In other words, children learn to read the word and read the world (Freire, 1996).

The Cases

Strategies used by successful principals in the Spanish study are fundamentally aimed at developing a collaborative environment to involve teachers in improving teaching and learning. Shared and collaborative leadership is promoted, and a combination of transformational and instructional leadership is used. All interviewed principals and teachers were enthusiastic about getting involved in projects to build communities of learning and described themselves as protagonists of the implementation of these projects. These principals were very aware of the importance of enabling teachers' participation in these projects which aimed at bringing together students of diverse backgrounds to be engaged in learning focused activities:

'...it is important to attend to the diversity of students, but it is even more important to attend to diversity.' (Principal A)

Across the Spanish cases, the principals' attention to instruction and diversity was grounded in an inclusive ethos described as an environment where 'teachers and students feel included and supported in the learning process.' As one principal described, 'I try to create an environment where everyone feels included and comfortable to contribute to the school.' He shared a school plan that featured social justice and change for students from families with fewer resources. This principal had worked with and through teachers to develop this long-term plan to help all children have opportunities for lifelong learning and a positive quality of life. It is no surprise that parents of the school trusted the actions of the principal and its students felt cared for, protected, and appreciated: 'he is very friendly with us... he knows our names and cares a lot about us...'. For this principal and others in the Spanish ISSPP cases, the key to success lies in their purpose, commitment and dedication towards excellence.

The Learning

The ISSPP methodology for cases studies allows deeper understandings of successful practice in context to emerge. In Spain, successful principals present a value system associated with inclusive practices for all students. The principal is conceived as more of a facilitating leader with collaborative approaches that enable an inclusive ethos. In Spain, successful principals are empathetic, approachable, and open to feedback and input. At the same time, they also show great determination in achieving their goals and maintain high levels of control over everything that happens in their schools. This control is not seen from an authoritarian perspective of restriction of freedom, but a necessary condition for the effective functioning of the school.

3.5. A Policy Perspective (Edited extract from Johansson & Ärlestig, 2022a & b)

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on the performance of Swedish schools, especially on their students' goal achievement. Reports indicate that results are worsening, when compared internationally. As a result, the Swedish government and parliament have actively worked to reform the national school system. The government has strengthened the Education Act, changed curricula and syllabi, made revisions to a range of statutes, and also reformed the training for principals and teachers. *The aim of these changes is to facilitate increased goal achievement.* Over the past 20 years local school governance in Sweden has also become increasingly complex. Not only are there 290 municipalities with various stakeholders at different levels, but there is also a large number of independent responsible organizations free from public control. As a result, older governing structures have been partially replaced by new ones, making the interplay between different levels and stakeholders especially interesting.

Responsible parties within municipalities and independent schools must interpret decisions made at the national level so that they can facilitate their implementation at the local level. Principals and teachers are required to translate these goals into activities and instruction, which, in turn, are to support individual students' learning and results. In a goal and results-oriented system, each level should also ideally be aware of schools' performance levels. In a long governing chain intervening spaces where actors meet to interpret and discuss performance is one way forward.

The Cases

In one ISSPP study in Sweden, successful principals' leadership was analyzed in relation to the government's imperative to directly associate social goals and pupils' learning outcomes. When it comes to the relationship between the principal's leadership and the school's results, teachers believe that principals in schools that are successful both socially and knowledge-wise take greater responsibility for their curriculum assignment. A link between the principal's leadership and the school's goal fulfilment regarding social goals has been identified. In the schools that are considered to be successful in terms of social goals, principals are judged by their teachers as taking responsibility for their national mission to a greater extent than principals in the schools that are less successful in terms of social goals. According to the principals, the prerequisites that contribute to the principal's success are that the principal is knowledgeable, has the trust of the teachers, and that their interaction and cooperation with teachers works.

The Learning: Synchronising Leadership Priorities with Social Goals

A recurring theme in Swedish ISSPP studies has been the principals' work with the social goals of eliminating bullying and abusive treatment. The authors' conclusions are that successful schools have a culture, structure and leadership that is synchronized in their work with the social goals. In schools with more limited bullying, there are peer supporters, a bullying plan and pupils have more influence. The teachers have a stronger culture of collaboration, and the principal is more change-oriented and stands for ethical leadership. By empowering students, not only are their social skills developed, but so also, so is their knowledge of various subjects. Leadership in underperforming schools with a high degree of bullying is characterized by the ability to highlight problems but not to be able to work in new ways (Ahlström, 2010); whereas successful principals take various actions as a result of their analyses of the organization's history, structure and culture, in co-operation with the governing chain (Ärlestig, 2008; Johansson & Ärlestig, 2022a & b).

3.6. Vignette 6 Mexico: Leaving No-One Behind, Leaving No-One Out: The Importance of Compassion (Edited extract from Bastumante et al., 2024)

The Context

In Mexico, government policies, federal and state, coincide in the purpose of 'leaving no one behind, leaving no one out' (DOF, 2019) within the framework of an inclusive culture that allows strengthening strategies that help address the backwardness education by establishing conditions that foster the implementation of the educational policy called 'New Mexican School', which is aimed at providing opportunities by guaranteeing mandatory education.

The Case

Yoana has been the principal of this rural primary school, located in an area of high agricultural production – where there is a lack of public services, a floating, marginalized population with little sense of belonging, multiple problems of vandalism, drug addiction, prostitution, and groups or gangs – for the last four years. The infrastructure that

surrounds the school is precarious, with water, electricity, and telephone services scarce, and unstable, creating health and sanitation problems. Being 64 km from the city, staff attendance and retention has traditionally been poor. Prior to Yoana's arrival, this situation had made school organization difficult, and not enabled a collective culture to take root.

Yoana changed this. As a native of the area, with a deep knowledge about the community, she identified with the students and their families, believing that community needs are possible to be resolved through the relationships that she established with other institutions, such as the health center, the police station, the community schools, and the services of the National System for Comprehensive Development for the Family, among others. She worked constantly to motivate the teaching staff to provide timely, equitable, and supportive care to students and their families, to improve their life situation, managing support and solving problems in an agile, culturally responsive way.

The Importance of Belonging

At school, and in the principal and teachers' performance, the sense of belonging is appreciated, as well as empathy for the context of the students, most of whom are children of agricultural workers with low schooling levels and low improvement expectations. In these families, there is the precariousness of economic resources and time to attend to the academic needs of their children, due to the long working hours that leave them exhausted when they get home. Safety and security are fundamental issues. Students are protected when they enter, stay and leave school. Parents, principal, and teachers work together in the community.

In this context, a high priority for Yoana has been to maintain the stability of her teaching staff, encouraging them to develop their skills, generating a favorable environment for teaching and learning, establishing 'analysis' spaces with teachers to reflect on their practice. The task is tiring, but rewarding, because the institution has been able to maintain its quality standards, despite the adversities. Within her tenure as principal, she has also initiated and sustained a group of parents, mainly those who belong to the school parents' society board and neighbors, who support the needs and requests that the school makes to support children's learning. These parents recognize the leadership work of the principal and the educational performance of the teachers.

The vision that she has shared with the team is that at school children have the option of improving current conditions and that, through education, they can have opportunities to improve themselves.

'There is a group of teachers who care about children, who are committed to education, who work for children, and that makes me think that our school is on the right track. It is a challenge for parents to be included in the work and when I manage to have a group of parents who are concerned, that gives me satisfaction.' (Interview 2 principal)

The Learning: Leadership Compassion

Yoana's work as a principal serving a socially and economically unstable population demonstrates the importance of generating high expectations in students through a combination of personal, biographically rooted beliefs, strategies of collaboration, empathy, rootedness in the community, and involvement of different actors to achieve the well-being of the educational community.

The principal has also stayed here, not only did she come as principal, but she has stayed here at the school and with long-term projects, just like me. (Interview Teacher 1)

Her compassion and care is evident in the hope that she gave to each teacher, and to each student. She was convinced that change is possible if everyone works together in attending to each child and each family. This commitment and her own life experiences contributed to her deep, empathetic understanding of the needs of teachers, parents, and students as well as to her recognition that real change is complex, happens slowly and is a daily challenge to be navigated with care and compassion.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRINCIPAL PREPARATION, RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Over the last twenty years, the ISSPP research has provided an evidence-based understanding of ‘success’ in the principalship and contributed to the field of educational leadership unequivocal evidence explaining how and why leadership matters in improving all pupils’ learning, developing teachers, and transforming schools. The evidence also shows that the current profound policy, social, cultural and economic challenges for improving and sustaining education quality and equity in schools are broadly similar, and not necessarily new. As Mitchell (2011) put it, ‘the half-century old issues of educational opportunity, academic excellence, and social cohesion are still very close to the centre of contemporary political debates’ (2011, p.8). However, as we have outlined in this paper, the pace, complexity and intensity of the challenges to which school leaders need to respond appear to have changed significantly over time. The complex and shifting contexts of education present *conceptual* and *pedagogical* challenges that have implications for the design and content of leadership preparation and development programmes.

- **Capturing the complexity**

It is no longer enough to present only preferred generalised leadership ‘models’, lament the negative effects of policy decision, or equip leaders with generalisable sets of strategies and skills without paying attention to leadership, values, dispositions, qualities, and agency. If such programmes are to influence, then research suggests that they must be located in the known realities of principals’ workplaces, reflect their complexities, and based upon deep knowledge of school improvement pathways.

Many leadership development programmes tend to be driven by simplistic and discrete competence-based models which place emphases on linear, staged knowledge and skills development. However, as the ISSPP research and the wider literature consistently shows, the influence of different leadership practices travels different routes (i.e. influence different mediators) to improve student outcomes (Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016; Leithwood, Patten, and Jantzi, 2010). Their various effects on school improvement processes and outcomes are both *interactive* and *interdependent* and combine to create synergistic influences on teacher quality and student achievement. The conceptual implication for leadership preparation and development is, therefore, a need to create pathways in design that enable school leaders to *see the systems*, understand how different leadership practices, individually and in combination, influence student outcomes, and learn to prioritise actions and strategies in ways that are both values-led and contextually and culturally responsive and impactful.

- **Enacting learning in context: theory into practice**

Pedagogically, using collaborative enquiries to enable school leaders to *develop* and *apply* deep factual and evidence-informed knowledge and skills about the leadership and school improvement pathways in their own contexts that make learning relevant, situated, and impactful. This situated approach to learning and development will challenge and support school leaders to understand, at depth, how different individual, organisational and community factors present holistically in real classroom and school contexts and enact the technical knowledge about leadership in ways that enable them to understand *what works, for whom, and under what conditions*. Their learning experience is, therefore, not an ‘add-on’ to their workload. Rather, it is relevant and integral to improving the quality and efficiency of their leadership in their work contexts. As important, such enquiry-oriented learning experience strengthens leaders’ capacity for reflection on their practice as a foundation skill that will underpin their professional development throughout their leadership career.

- **Productive disruption**

Enacting the processes that lead towards success essentially relies on understanding success itself as multi-dimensional and multi-layered, that ‘success’ is never ‘perfection’, and that the learning and achievement journey for schools, staff and students can never be said to end. Although successful principals employ similar strategies, and hold similar values, how they engage in initiating, or respond to different forms of disruption on ordinary school days, build new routines, capacities and organisational systems incrementally or transformatively, in ways and at times that enable their schools to continue to thrive, differs (Gu, Mincu & Day, 2004). Key in this regard are successful school principals who, whilst ‘disrupting’ existing norms of thinking and behaviour for the good, do so through knowing how to design the social and intellectual conditions which engage the hearts and minds of individuals in the school; being able to build, consolidate and renew the capacity for further growth and development; and, through this, harness their ideas, experiences, knowledge, relationships, and commitment to fulfil shared values and achieve shared goals.

- **Being able to navigate and help others to do so**

They must engage participants in learning to navigate uncertain environments and actively engage others in this, recognising that the leadership and management is a social process.

Successful principals understand, respond to, navigate, and mediate a range of potentially disruptive multi-layered external and internal forces. To do so, they draw upon their own and others’ personal learning resources. The role of communities of practice in supporting learning has been well documented since the original work by Lave and Wenger (1991). The core concept, underpinned by the social learning theory, resides in the recognition that interacting with peers in the workplace fosters learning and information sharing and improves practice. Engaging all

stakeholders in the workplace to foster collective intelligence of a learning network supports and enhances the situated, collaborative nature of leadership learning (Leithwood, Gu, Eleftheriadou & Baines, 2024). A well-functioning network of collegial communities contributes to the capacity of individual members by exposing them to the practices, dispositions and ideas of others faced with similar tasks and responsibilities.

- **Leading with compassion, resilience, and wellbeing in mind**

At a time when shortage of teachers and school principals has become a challenge for many schools in many countries, especially in schools serving socioeconomically disadvantaged and marginalised communities, developing and retaining those who are already in the profession and support them to continue to feel valued about the worthy course that they have chosen for their professional lives should be seen as a systems obligation.

We have learned that school leaders' wellbeing entails much more than emotions and happiness. How school leaders feel about their job and how satisfied they are about what they achieve is essentially located in an ethical calling that they believe they can make a difference to the learning and achievement of the children – for whom they have deep moral and professional responsibilities. Improving school leaders' efficacy, capacities, and capabilities – *individually* in their schools and *collectively* in the wider education systems – is integral in enabling them to fulfil their vocational calling. What it means for policymakers and school leaders is a coherent and consistent effort to provide the time, resources and environments that enable leaders to learn, grow and develop so that they have the capacity and capabilities to fulfil a meaningful life for their students and themselves.

Taken together, it is clear that successful principals are those whose educational agendas include but go far beyond meeting the demands of external systems of performativity and strict accountability. They are resilient, passionate, and efficacious about developing communities of learning and belonging for all teachers and students whom they lead, and through these, bringing about hope and promise to help them to reach their full potential. It follows that by applying new learning in their everyday work contexts, school leaders strengthen their knowledge, skills and capabilities to use evidence to inform their leadership decisions and practices. With this, leadership preparation and development become an integral part of school leaders' preparation, and continuing effort to improve the quality and efficiency of their existing leadership roles, responsibilities, and commitments.

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