The Complex Landscape of Successful Principal Practices:
An International Perspective

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Abstract: *This concluding article discusses the commonalities and differences in instructional leadership, capacity building and culturally responsive leadership in each pair of articles. It begins with a brief discussion regarding the value of comparative international research studies. Then, it highlights the complex dimensions of leadership that appear in these national comparisons, including differences between and within the national contexts in terms of leadership practices. This article concludes with suggestions for future research.*

In a book whose title vividly reflects the increasing globalization of our lives and work, Thomas Friedman (2005) in *The World is Flat* describes how national and regional boundaries are breaking down especially in terms of information and communication. Although education and educational leadership have strong national, regional, and even local contextual influences, an increasing number of scholars acknowledge and analyze the international similarities and differences of educational reform and educational leadership. This special issue of *International Studies in Educational Leadership* is an example of valuing an international perspective to enrich the understanding of successful leadership practices. The cases in this issue provide a very useful set of analyses of the commonalities and differences among and within national contexts related to the practice of school principals or headteachers and in doing so depict the complexity of successful leadership practice.

This concluding article attempts to analyze and identify these commonalities and differences from the studies presented in this issue and in doing so to highlight the dimensions of leadership complexity and to identify suggestions for future research. The article begins with a brief acknowledgement of the value of comparative international studies.

Importance of Comparative International Studies

Edward Page (1995) identified four types of comparative studies: single country studies, juxtapositions, thematic comparisons, and causal explanations. All four enrich our understanding of national contexts and the practices of individuals within organizations in those contexts. The International Successful School Principal Project (ISSPP), an example of thematic comparisons, deepens our understanding of three features of successful school leader practice: instructional leadership, organizational capacity, and culturally-responsive

practices. As several of the authors found, the actual enactment of successful school leadership does not always fit the normative ideas of some of the leadership literature. Education, perhaps as much as any field, is vulnerable to normative models and simplistic reforms. Comparative, international analyses help to counter this trend by acknowledging the range of leadership practices, contexts, and reforms and to recognize that individual, collective, and societal forces influence the specific practices of school leadership.

The ISSPP project and these case studies also make a strong contribution to our understanding of successful school leader practice through the rigorous methodology used to conduct the case studies. As Jacobson and Day (this issue) point out, "To date, the ISSPP has produced over 60 cases, which makes it one of the largest international studies of successful school leadership ever undertaken" (p. ?). The use of data collected from multiple perspectives and from diverse contexts, and the collaborative nature of the research endeavor make these case studies useful in understanding the complexity of leadership practice. Although there are limitations to these studies, which I will address in the final section of this article, the set of articles in this special issue provide a rigorous examination of leadership practices from an international perspective that contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of leadership practices during an era of reform.

The analyses provided in this chapter will be organized in terms of the three key issues of school leadership identified by the authors: instructional leadership, organizational capacity, and culturally-responsive practices. Commonalities and differences between the pairs of studies focusing on these three issues will be identified and discussed. The reader, as well as this author, should be cautious about drawing too rigid conclusions regarding the commonalities and differences between the paired national contexts. Case study authors were obviously choosing to emphasize certain themes they found in their analyses and would probably not accept that some patterns were totally missing from the voices of their participants.

Instructional Leadership

The cases presented by Ylimaki (this issue) and Gurr, Drysdale and Mulford (this issue) of US and Australian schools and their principals focus on the variety of ways these principals saw and enacted instructional leadership (As Gurr et al., point out the preferred term in Australia is "educational leadership."). Both studies found similar practices that have been identified in the literature (e.g., Leithwood & Riehl, 2005 and Mulford, Silins, & Leithwood, 2004), including the professional development of teachers, the promotion of shared leadership, and high academic expectations. These leadership practices were clearly evident in the case studies of all the principals. Moreover, both studies found differences within their national contexts related to practices. These differences related to school contexts, principal background, and other influences. As Gurr et al., state, "educational leadership makes a difference in different ways." (p. 28) This point is critical in understanding the complexity of leadership and the importance of avoiding one-size-fits all approaches to successful school leadership.

Several important leadership differences between the two national contexts, however, stand out. In the U.S. cases, the principals' own pedagogical and curricular knowledge was emphasized in the principal and teacher interviews. This was especially true with the Fraser and Colman principals who had extensive experience in urban settings. The principal's own direct leadership through pedagogical knowledge shared with teachers was an important part of the leadership practice of these successful principals. Although the Australian principals demonstrated an understanding of curriculum and instruction, their leadership was

more indirect through "attracting, retaining and developing staff, promoting shared leadership and decision making, developing personal and professional capacity of staff…, and building relationships" (p. 23) Their more direct leadership practices that impacted student outcomes were through the principal's direct relationship with students. Fostering close relationships with students and, in the case of John, working directly in classrooms, became a critical leadership practice. In both cases, these principals were effective in promoting and enhancing instruction but with different direct and indirect practices.

Another difference related to the principal's understanding of and interaction with the broader context. In the Australian cases, Margaret, in particular, buffered the school and the teachers from external demands that did not fit the educational goals of the school. No such example of bold confrontation with external authorities is evident in the U.S. cases. Again, it is important not to make too much of a non-finding in the U.S. case, but this assumed difference raises the question of whether the accountability context in the U.S. has resulted in a view of the principal's role as enforcer of state accountability mandates rather than as instructional leader. Are U.S. principals, especially in schools under intense pressure to raise achievement scores, enacting a role that ignores a buffering responsibility to shield the school and teachers from undesirable or untenable pressures and demands?

Organizational Capacity

The second key issue that the researchers in this special issue examined and compared was the school leader's practice in developing and enriching the school's organizational capacity. The U.S. and England cases, authored by Giles (this issue) and Day (this issue), once again demonstrate the complexity of leadership practice. A strong common leadership practice found in both studies to promote organizational capacity involved the school leader addressing basic management needs, such as safety and order. Day describes this as a key leadership element of the first phase of schools coming out of "special measures." And Giles mentions this as a "crucial first step in winning the support of teachers and parents." (p.36) Earlier normative approaches to instructional leadership have sometimes ignored management and its role in creating organizational capacity to support learning. In fact, management has received a bad name in recent leadership reform trends, with the faulty assumption that successful principals ignore managerial responsibilities. Recognizing that addressing managerial needs is essential to organizational capacity further supports the complexity of leadership practice especially in challenging schools.

Both authors of the U.S. and England studies found that successful leaders created various types of structures to enhance organizational capacity. Creating leadership teams, distributed leadership, collaborations with universities, and professional development strategies, such as mentoring, were important practices of these schools leaders. The use of teams within the school was a common element across national contexts.

Day (this issue) and Giles (this issue) both strongly acknowledge the complexity and differences in how leadership is practiced to enhance organizational capacity. Day, in an analysis long overdue in our understanding of leadership practice, emphasizes the developmental quality of those differences. Leadership practices vary depending on the developmental phase in which the school is moving toward improvement. Giles appropriately emphasizes the way leadership practices vary according to school contexts and how these practices look, for example, "very different from the extended vision-making process advocated in some popular leadership texts" (p.36)

The cases presented by Giles (this issue) and Day (this issue) also point to some differences between the U.S. and England in leadership practices to enhance organizational capacity. Although both focus on those leadership practices that involve collective efforts, e.g., leadership teams, the England case focuses on individual and community to a larger degree than what is reported in the U.S. case. For example, headteachers in the England case described their specific work with individuals. This included in Developmental Phase One "leading by example" through working directly with students and "showing the staff that they can do it." (p.43). It also involved providing the type of "psychological and social security" to convince students to take ownership of their learning. In addition to the individual level, the school leaders in the England case also developed strategies for community involvement and close working relationships with parents, governors, and external agencies as a critical way to enhance organizational capacity. For example these headteachers enacted leadership through "gaining community acceptance" in Phase 1 to "involving the community" in Phase 3. In the U.S. cases, the principals' focus tended to be primarily on teachers through creating various school structures, including leadership teams. Again, it would be exaggerated to conclude that the U.S. principals had no involvement with individual students or teachers or community members. But the focus of attention seems to be different in these two cases.

Culturally Responsive Practices

The final pairing of cases focuses on the U.S. and Norwegian principals' use of culturally responsive practices. The Johnson (this issue) and Vedøy/Møller (this issue) articles identify some common leadership practices that enhance cultural responsiveness and they strikingly portray a dilemma in leadership practice that reflects complexity in this area.

In terms of common leadership practices related to cultural responsiveness, care is an important quality in both cases. Johnson (this issue) describes the ethic of care, in which, for example, the Costello principal was described by parents as a "'mother and grandmother' (sometimes a stern one) for both the students and many of the young parents at Costello" (p.52). In the Norwegian case, the Skog principal, in particular, focuses on caring. For the Brage principal, respect is the stronger focus. But in all of these cases, these qualities of appreciation, recognition, kindness, compassion, and valuing of not only students but their homes and families are critical qualities of the successful leaders' practices. These qualities are frequently ignored in normative discussions of how successful leaders contribute to student learning and school improvement, and thus these two studies add another important dimension to the complexity of leadership practice.

In both studies, these qualities of care and respect are tied to high expectations for student learning. In fact, Vedøy and Møller (this issue) describe how the Brage principal viewed respect as closely tied to the recognition of the school's responsibility to ensure learning for all students without treating students as defective (as suggested in the Skog principal interviews). Johnson (this issue), in the U.S. case, mentions the Costello principal who "established her high expectations that all students 'can and will learn.'" (p.51) In both cases, leadership practice ties care/respect with high expectations for learning rather than splitting these two critical areas of practice.

Several interesting differences appear in the two cases that further reflect the complexity of leadership practices. In the U.S. case, Johnson (this issue) describes the Fraser principal's community advocacy role. This involved actually being an advocate for the parents and the

larger community to "make their community a better place to live." (p. 53). The Fraser principal developed "action groups" to solve community problems, meet with politicians, and create telephone campaigns to put pressure on government officials. In this way the principal directly modeled human agency, demonstrating to the parents and community how to effect change. In the Norwegian case (Vedøy and Møller, this issue), no such direct advocacy role is described. Admittedly, the focus of the Norwegian case is on the role conceptions of these two principals related to what guides their leadership practice with students and parents. Thus, the Brage and Skog principals may have been involved in political advocacy but the article does not reflect this. The advocacy role is an intriguing feature of the U.S. case, especially for the Fraser principal. Whether this advocacy role is an exception or another developing thread in the complex fabric of leadership practice needs further study.

Vedøy and Møller (this issue) describe the Brage principal's practice in hiring diverse faculty and integrating them in the total faculty, so that all students interact with them and all teachers (have) responsibility for the minority students' education. They also point to how multicultural education is more integrated in the Brage case. The Brage principal's practices are in contrast to the Skog principal who hires specialist faculty to work specifically with minority language students. No mention is made in the U.S. case (Johnson, this issue) of either the Costello or Fraser principal's practice in regard to hiring diverse faculty and how minority students are integrated in the school. In fact, Johnson notes, "…there is little evidence from the data we collected about their instructional program that these leaders incorporated students' home cultures or community 'funds of knowledge' in the day-to-day curriculum of their schools" (p.55). In these U.S. cases, it appears that while the Costello and Fraser principals "care" about these students and model agency for their parents, they do not integrate the students' own experience and cultures into the technical core of the school.

The Norwegian and U.S. cases capture a striking dilemma or set of differences for leaders in developing culturally-responsive practices that further reflects the complexity of leadership practices. This difference is actually laid out by Vedøy and Møller (this issue) in contrasting the Brage and Skog principals, but it is also reflected in Johnson's (this issue) concern with the lack of integration of students' home cultures and "funds of knowledge." The Brage principal, according to Vedøy and Møller, integrates the students' personalized language and cultures as a means to reach the overall school goal that all students learn. In contrast, the Skog principal focuses on home cultures in such a way that the minority students are treated as minorities and thus isolated from the larger school practices and purposes. "Multicultural issues are thus an important part of practice at Brage, while they at Skog exist as an isolated part of the daily work" (p. 65). Based on Johnson's conclusion, it appears the Costello and Fraser principals ignore the use of the home cultures of the minority students in school and leadership practices. The complexity that these differences expose relate to the important role that school leaders play in increasingly diverse schools and in responding to the unique needs of a diverse student population. Finding a balance between honoring student home cultures and emphasizing student learning is a complicated and varied endeavor for school leaders and does not lend itself to normative models and quick fixes. Such an intricate balance requires sensitive, insightful practices that acknowledge the interaction of such factors as differential experiences of diverse populations, specific contextual factors both inside and outside the schools, and the school leader's own cultural sensitivity and skills.

Dimensions of Complexity in Leadership Practices

Several dimensions of the complexity of successful leadership practice found in these cross-national comparisons have been identified in this article. Certainly others could be and should be identified in subsequent research.

First, leadership practices for instructional leadership involve both direct and indirect practices (Gurr et al., this issue). These types of practices appear to differ across national contexts and even within national contexts. Some examples were found of direct practices, such as the use of the principal's pedagogical knowledge in the U.S. cases (Ylimaki, this issue) and, in the case of one of the Australian principals (Gurr et al., this issue), actual classroom teaching by the principal. In the U.S., the historical trend has been away from the principal actually teaching or providing professional development based on pedagogical and curricular knowledge. In other countries, e.g., England, school leaders continue to teach groups of students. The complexity of instructional leadership practices seems to involve balancing direct and indirect leadership practices. This balance depends on issues such as school size (Southworth, 2004) and specific school needs.

Second, instructional leadership has typically been described as what principals do inside the school walls–monitoring instruction, and conducting professional development. But the Gurr et al., (this issue) study in particular suggests that the broader context is critical for successful instructional leadership. This also suggests a buffering dimension to the principal's role. Although buffering is not a new idea, it may have been ignored recently with the pressure of accountability mandates. A boldness or courageous quality of leadership practices that necessitates buffering may be necessary for correcting or weakening inappropriate external demands that tilt the school's efforts away from a unique contextual understanding of student success.

Third, the Giles (this issue) and Day (this issue) cases of the U.S. and England principals both point to the importance of managerial elements of leadership practice that are necessary for developing organizational capacity. Instead of ignoring the managerial responsibilities of leaders to create safe, secure learning environments, to manage resources to support a learning organization, and to facilitate school systems that provide time for teaching and learning, the principal must balance management and leadership. This particular balance is part of the complexity of the job and depends, as Day reminds us, on the developmental phase of school growth and improvement.

Fourth, the U.S. and England cases also point to three dimensions of leadership practices to ensure organizational capacity: individual, collective, and community (Day, this issue). These practices go beyond creating collective structures such as teaming to facilitate individual and community resources and power. The role of community, in particular, suggests that successful school leaders are engaged in broader contexts and involve themselves in securing community acceptance and support for the school.

Fifth, the third pairing of studies, the Johnson (this issue) and Vedøy/Møller (this issue) cases, emphasize that successful school leaders tie care/respect with a focus on student learning. In challenging school contexts, the school leader plays an important role not only in assessing and promoting good instruction but doing so in a respectful and caring environment that acknowledges and uses the home cultures of students and parents. Instead of being separate roles for leaders, these qualities are intricately tied together to avoid isolating minority students.

Sixth, closely related to previous dimensions around the leader's recognition and practice in the broader context of the school, the role of the school leader as community advocate broadens the complexity of leadership practices. Enacting an advocate role may not be necessary in many school contexts, but it appears at least from the Johnson study (this issue) that in some challenging contexts, it is an appropriate role for school leaders.

Finally, an exciting and useful dimension of complexity that appears in these national comparisons is that not only are there differences between the national contexts in terms of leadership practices, but there are differences within the national contexts. The differences between the Costello and Fraser principals (Johnson, this issue) and between the Brage and Skog principals (Vedøy and Møller, this issue) in terms of culturally-responsive practices illustrate this well. The lack of uniformity within national contexts demonstrates and reminds us of the importance of a variety of contextual influences on leadership practice, including developmental stage (Day, this issue), and community setting (Vedøy &Møller, this issue) These within-nation cases also remind us of differences in leadership practices related to more individual qualities, such as principal experience (Ylimaki, this issue).

Implications for Future Research

The cases in this special issue raise several possible avenues for future research both in terms of their limitations and their findings. First, broadening the types of countries for examining leadership practices would provide even more useful international perspectives. The countries used in the cases of this special issue were all Western-oriented national contexts with resulting Western perspectives on leadership, educational purpose, and state-school relationship. This can be, and is, a useful way to limit the number of variables affecting the understanding and explanation of leadership practices. However, it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations as well of this narrow perspective. Hopefully, future studies of leadership practice will examine a broader set of national contexts, which are likely to enrich the understanding of the complexity of leadership practices.

Second, all the pairings in this issue had a U.S. set of cases. Again, there are values in this type of comparative analysis. However, the comparisons are limited by U.S. contexts, reforms, and practices. The larger ISSPP project and subsequent studies that compare non-Western and Western contexts in terms of leadership practices would make a significant contribution to the literature and practice of leadership.

Third, a striking feature in the cases presented in this issue is personal leader qualities, such as length of experience as a principal/head and type of prior experience. A closer examination of these factors would be valuable in understanding other complexities and varieties of leadership practice. How experience and other personal characteristics impact the focus, balance of direct and indirect practices, and other features identified above would make significant contributions to our understanding of school leader practices and to the preparation of these leaders.

Finally, Day's (this issue) depiction of the developmental quality as a factor in understanding leadership practices is valuable for future research. Applying a developmental understanding both to the school leader and to the school context could result in a stronger portrayal of the complexity of leadership practices than the typical cross-sectional studies.

Although the literature on school improvement and student learning has matured in many ways in regard to the growing evidence of the importance of school leaders, the actual

literature on what successful leaders do–their practices–typically relies on some older studies and tends to be normative in its orientation. The studies conducted in the ISSPP project and those cases reported in this special issue are valuable in extending our understanding of these leadership practices beyond normative and uniform findings. Using cross-national comparisons provides a useful tool for enriching our understanding of the complexity of leadership practices.

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