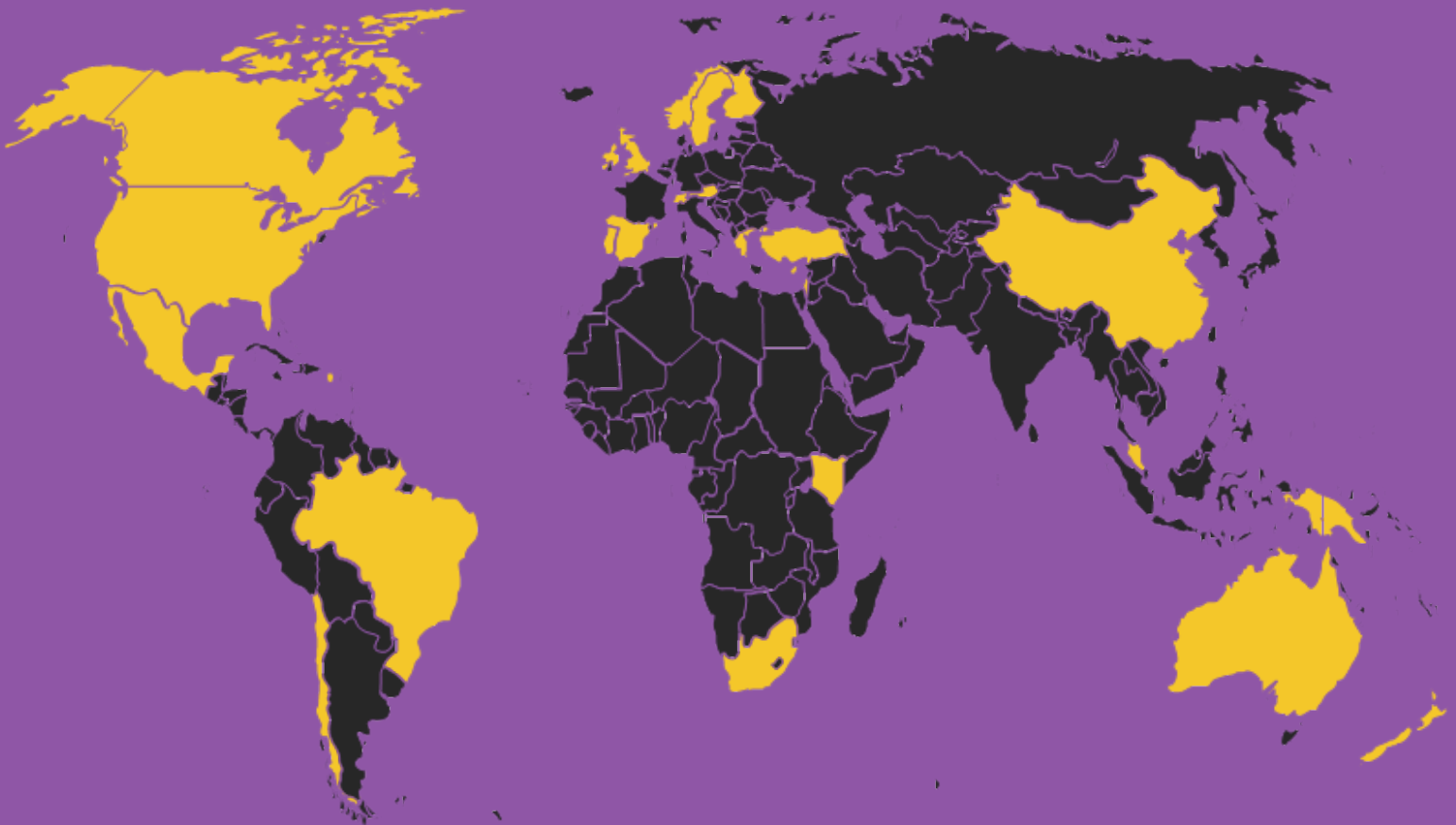




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# International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP): Multi-Perspective Research on School Principals



The ISSPP is the first and longest running project of its kind with 25 countries taking part in international research collaboration.

*Christopher Day, The University of Nottingham*

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## The origins

- ISSPP began at a meeting of interested parties held at The University of Nottingham, UK in 2001
- at the meeting, it was agreed that, whilst there was much research and writing about school principals, much of it was based upon self-report, limited to quantitative 'school effectiveness' studies, which, while valuable, were not able to answer the 'How' and 'Why' questions, and did not focus upon 'successful' schools and school principals specifically
- those present at the meeting agreed that conducting multi-perspective case studies of schools deemed to be successful in each country would provide valuable evidence, which would contribute to knowledge about the principalship and help inform policy and practice
- the project was the first of its kind. It has resulted in a comprehensive picture of the characteristics and strategies of successful school leaders in primary and secondary schools in different socio-economic circumstances in different jurisdictions
- ISSPP members in 25 countries have developed case studies, organised national and international dissemination conferences and produced numerous academic papers in reputable journals internationally, as well as several special issues and books

**“The International Successful School Principalship Project is the most comprehensive and coherent international comparative study of the principalship ever undertaken...If ever there was a sound basis for outstanding policymaking it surely has been constructed in this project.”**

*Professor Brian Caldwell*

### The ISSPP Network

- the ISSPP is not an organisation
- it operates with a minimum level of bureaucracy and seeks no subscriptions from its members
- its continuation and development relies upon their willingness to be collaborative, and use the same research tools, protocols and means of analysis in all their ISSPP research



# The ISSPP: three key strands

## Strand 1: Successful school principals

- school principals of primary and secondary schools
- principals in schools located in areas of high social and economic disadvantage
- principals who sustain success

## Strand 2: Principals of schools which under-perform

- principals in visible and invisible under-performing schools

## Strand 3: Principal identities

- principal identities

Systematic analysis of the multi-perspective case study data within and across the participating ISSPP countries has provided a wealth of rich qualitative data which point to a number of key qualities, skills and behaviours central to successful principalship in all contexts. These have been reported through journal papers, special issues of journals (Jacobson, Day and Leithwood, 2005), and books (Day and Gurr, 2014; Day and Leithwood, 2007; Moos, Johansson & Day, 2011; Ylimaki and Jacobson, 2011).

These both confirm, complement and go beyond findings from previous and subsequent research by others. They

provide new insights and powerful images, particularly about the kinds of reflexivity, inner values, philosophies and intra as well as inter-professional qualities, skills and strategies which successful principalship demands, regardless of culture, country and school context.

ISSPP research shows consistently that regardless of country, culture and socio-economic context, successful principals are defined as being those who attend, with their teachers, to the broad moral, social and ethical issues in educating pupils as well as achieving excellent student results in academic tests and examinations.

# STRAND 1: Successful school principals

## Objectives are to:

- identify the criteria used to define successful leadership in each participating country
- investigate and analyse the knowledge, skills and dispositions which successful school leaders use in implementing leadership practices across a range of successful primary and secondary schools in different countries and in different policy and social contexts
- identify those leadership practices that are uniquely important to large vs small schools, urban vs rural schools, schools with homogenous vs diverse student populations, and high vs low poverty schools
- explore the relationship between leadership values, practices, broader social and school specific conditions, and student outcomes in different countries.

## The questions

In each research site, we ask, “What are the characteristics, values, strategies and practices of successful principals and what influences these?” Across sites, we ask, “Which characteristics, values, strategies and practices are similar and which are different, and what are the reasons for the differences?”

**“I love my job, I love it. It is not all hard work and drudgery, and, how am I going to get through it?’ It is actually exhilarating.”**

*School Principal*

## The results

There are more similarities than differences among those who are successful and who have sustained the success of their schools.

Whilst the social, political and educational histories of schools differ from country to country, all principals are experiencing change which emanates from:

- social movements (changes in families, expectations of schools, attitudes of students)
- the ever increasing interests of central and municipal governments in measurable ‘performance’ and ‘performativity’
- attending to what it means to be a 21st century school including trends towards personalisation of the learning experience and teacher work as a collaborative endeavour, greater use of feedback to improve performance at all levels (student, teacher, parent, school, system), the increasing use of technology to support learning and new school building designs

High expectations are a consistent feature of successful principals, and, indeed, a consistent feature of more than 50 years of evidence from effective schools research. The high expectations are both at a personal and collective level.

A standout characteristic also of the principals is the degree to which they are respected and trusted by their school communities. Acting with integrity and being transparent about their values, beliefs and actions, modeling good practice, being careful to ensure fairness in how they dealt with people, involving many in decision making, are qualities and practices that engender respect and trust (Gurr, 2014, p.1-2).



# Agency over structure

External changes are testing the values, resolve and resilience of principals in all schools in all countries. However:

- 'successful principals' possess, retain and communicate in all that they do and say, a strong sense of agency, tested but not dominated by policy structures. They have core sets of deeply held values and moral and ethical purposes, and immense amounts of emotional understandings of themselves and others
- they work long hours, are totally committed, have a clear, well-articulated sense of purpose and individual identity
- they build and sustain individual and collective capacities
- they are deeply respected and trusted by the communities which they serve; and are persistently resilient
- they display critical assertiveness rather than complacency in response to the sustained externally imposed reformist cultures in which they and their colleagues work
- they display high expectations and hopefulness in themselves and others
- they are values led
- they produce academic success
- they produce wider success in areas such as curiosity, creativity, citizenship, spirituality, and so forth
- they are both transformative and instructional in their leadership of learning and achievement for all teachers and students

The research for this strand has:

- produced and published the largest, most comprehensive body of research internationally on successful principal leadership
- provided a unique contribution to knowledge in successful schools
- developed over one hundred cases of successful primary and secondary principals across the participating countries
- continues to build on this unparalleled and unique bank of case knowledge

# STRAND 2: Principals in under-performing schools

This strand is designed to investigate **two** kinds of schools which are under-performing:

- those that have positive pre-requisites (high socio-economic status, parental involvement, external measures and judgements) but are under-performing
- those which have low pre-requisites (low socio-economic status, low tax base, negative external measures and judgements) and are under-performing



**“We have yet to take a student to a national school. However, my greatest hope is that the success in this school will outlive me. ...That many of the children I have here today will live better lives than their parents, and that this community will look back and be proud of what we have achieved together.”**

*James Chamuada, Kenya*



# STRAND 3: Principals' identities

This strand is in acknowledgement of the importance to the work of the principal of a strong and positive sense of professional identity.



**“Research tells us that success is achieved over time through the values-informed application of combinations and accumulations of context sensitive strategies. These are based upon the principal’s diagnosis of and wise and timely responses to the concerns of policy and parents, the professional needs of staff and the best, broad educational interests of all pupils. It is the relative intensity with which these are applied and sustained in particular phases of the school’s improvement journey which makes the difference. This is at the heart of what successful leaders do in achieving and sustaining success.”**

*Christopher Day, United Kingdom*





Principals discussing the ISSPP process

# International understandings: caring for the process

It is easy to underestimate the amount of time needed in order to come to a deep understanding of the ways schools work in our different countries. For example, the 'Bildung/ Dannelse' of liberal education in Scandinavian schools was and is very different from the 'Democratic' principles that underpin the work of those in America. 'Success' itself is difficult to quantify when pupils are not tested until the age of 16, as is the case in some countries.

"One of the real surprising things in this project (ISSPP) is that when we started in 2001/2002 we could never agree with colleagues from other countries what a good school is, because the Nordic way of looking at schools was very different from America and England. These days we seem to agree more: we all know what a good school is."

*Lejf Moos, Denmark*



# Information

What continues to characterise the ISSPP Network is its culture of collegiality, care, integrity, rigour and trust.

## Research and practice conferences

Every two years, the ISSPP organises a conference for researchers and senior school leaders to share practice and new academic and practice-based knowledge. They have been held in the United Kingdom, USA and Sweden. The 2015 conference is in Spain.

## Communication

The ISSPP collaboration process is sustained through email, telephone, exchange of country-specific contextual and emerging case study data. Face-to-face meetings take place between all members each year, and between some more frequently, in different countries:

- to share experience of research practice and findings
- to affirm generic survey and interview protocols
- to agree and discuss methods of analysis of data
- to agree country specific 'add on' questions
- to ensure agreements, for example about the meaning of 'success', 'under-performing' and 'identity'
- to determine the meaning of criteria for the selection of principals and schools
- to discuss early findings from the case studies (which, because of funding disparities in timing do not all begin or end at the same time)
- to debate the key issues which emerge and agree on future research direction
- to agree on the nature and shape of conference presentations along the way
- to design research instruments which are suitable for administration in all countries

## Membership

Over the years, the ISSPP Network has become a professional learning community. All members are experienced researchers who have:

- published in the area of school leadership in their own countries and internationally
- acknowledged from their work that the quality of principal leadership, beliefs, values, strategies and practices, makes a great deal of difference to school improvement
- are all passionate at the prospect of collaboration in research

There are two kinds of membership:

- Full membership: here, there are four commitments:
  1. to use the agreed research tools and protocols, analyses and reporting framework
  2. to attend at least one formal meeting of the ISSPP annually
  3. to produce at least one case study in every two year period
  4. to begin with case studies of successful schools.
- Associate membership: all new members begin as associates. Over the two year period they agree to the conditions for full members. If, by the end of two years they have not fulfilled the requirements, then their membership ceases

## Steering group

- Christopher Day, United Kingdom (Co-ordinator)
- Olof Johansson, Sweden
- David Gurr, Australia
- Rose Ylimaki, USA
- Jorunn Møller, Norway

## Use of ISSPP materials (intellectual property):

- the materials which ISSPP members have developed in this and the three booklets that support the research methodology in the three strands of our work are being shared in the interests of the advancement of knowledge and understanding through international co-operation and collaboration
- they are copyrighted (either directly through this project or from previous research of the members), and so may only be used with the agreement of the copyright holders

## Conditions of use:

- data will be collected and analysed with integrity
- all findings will be passed on to the central ISSPP leadership team so that ISSPP continues to build knowledge of successful school principalship. We will then make this growing store of knowledge available to the research community
- all who use or intend to use these materials from the three strand booklets must sign a form of agreement and return to the ISSPP Co-ordinator

# Publications

There have been four project books and seven special issues of international journals

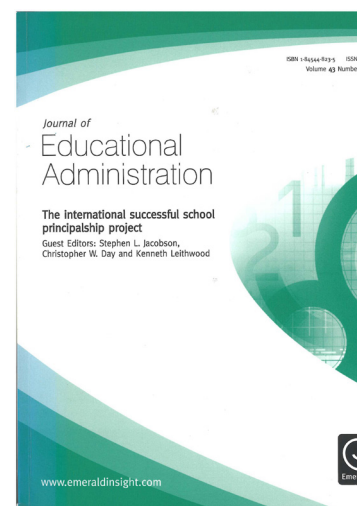
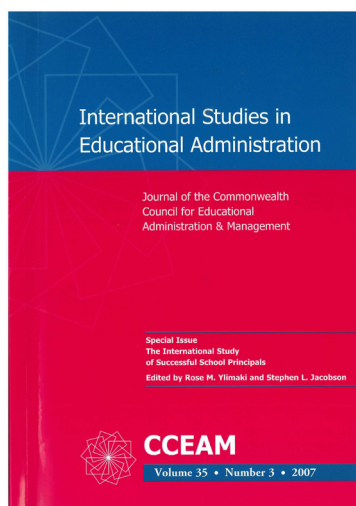
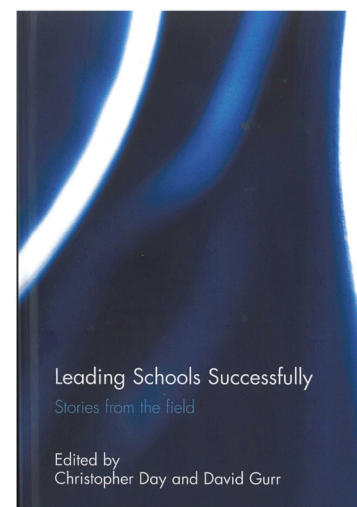
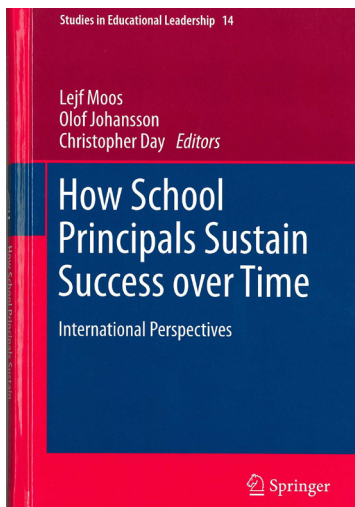
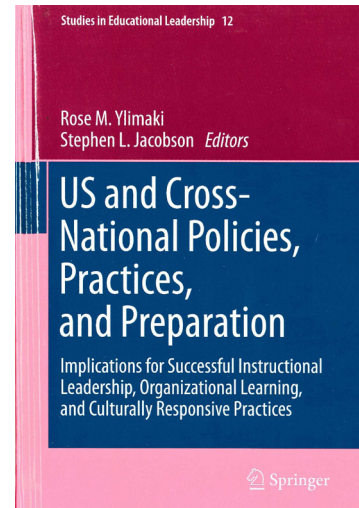
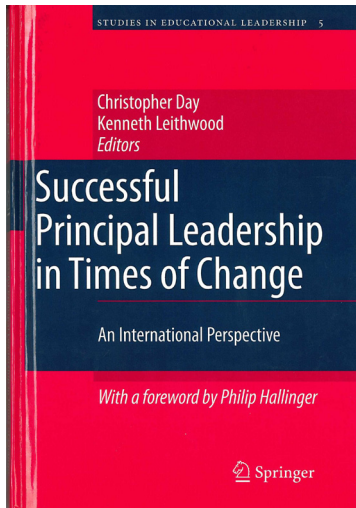
## Project Books

- Day, C & Gurr, D (Eds) (2014) *Leading Schools Successfully: Stories from the field* (London: Routledge)
- Leithwood, K & Day, C (Eds) *Successful School Leadership in Times of Change* (Netherlands: Springer-Kluwer)
- Moos, L, Johansson, O, & Day, C (Eds) (2011) *How School Principals Sustain Success Over Time: International Perspectives* (Netherlands: Springer-Kluwer)
- Ylimaki, R & Jacobson, S (Eds) (2011a) *US and cross-national policies, practices and preparation: Implications for successful instructional leadership, organizational learning, and culturally responsive practices* (Netherlands: Springer-Kluwer)

## Special Journal Issues

- Journal of Educational Administration, 43(6), 2005
- International Studies in Educational Administration, 35(3), 2007
- Journal of Educational Administration, 47(6), 2009
- Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice, 24(1), 2009
- Leadership and Policy in Schools, 10(4) 2011
- International Journal of Educational Management, 26(5), 2012
- Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership, 15 (3), 2012

Network members have produced between 150 and 200 publications of their work in ISSPP. You can access these at: [www.uv.uio.no/ils/english/research/projects/isspp/publications/](http://www.uv.uio.no/ils/english/research/projects/isspp/publications/)



The size of the project (the number of schools) in each country varies according to the level of resource.

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