Conceptualizations of School Leadership among High School Principals in Jamaica

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Drawing on evidence from research that adopted a qualitative case study design and used grounded theory methods of data analysis, this study examined how selected high school principals in Jamaica conceptualize school leadership. Data were sourced from semi-structured interviews, field observations as well as from school, principal and official Ministry of Education documents. Four critical aspects of the principals' conceptualizations are discussed: (a) the principals' understandings of leadership are primarily moral; (b) their leadership practices are organized around common values; (c) their leadership is sensitive to and interacts with a range of overlapping contexts; and (d) differences in personal and school community contexts account for variations in their leadership emphases and practices. The findings confirm the interpretation of school leadership as a moral undertaking; however, the principals in this study applied their understanding in individual ways, modifying their practices in response to unique contextual elements. The article concludes by suggesting how these findings can serve as a guide for future decisions about leadership training and professional development for practicing and aspiring principals in Jamaica.
Keywords: School Leadership, High School Principals, Jamaica.

Introduction

More than a quarter century after James MacGregor Burns (1978, p.2) described leadership as "one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth", complexity and uncertainty continue to characterize definitions of leadership, and scholars in the field of educational leadership point to the absence of a consensus about the meaning of school leadership (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach 1999, Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley & Beresford 2000). Attempts to make explicit and accessible understandings of what constitutes school leadership are important for a small, developing country like Jamaica, where the education system is resource-constrained, and where the National Education Inspectorate (2013) recently reported that 42% of the 205 schools inspected in 2011/12 were rated as unsatisfactory or in need of immediate support in the area of leadership and management.

Implicit in the Education System Transformation Programme (ESTP) policies and documents are demands on principals to increase the effectiveness of their schools, yet local research that articulates the meaning and reality of school leadership and provides a clear sense of practitioners' voices is limited. Moreover, in a context where the Ministry is establishing a National College for Educational Leadership (N-CEL) to provide training and support for aspiring and practising principals, it is especially important that insights into what constitutes school leadership be articulated through local voices. Against such a backdrop, this paper describes understandings and experiences of school leadership among four exemplary high school principals in Jamaica.

Purpose of the study

This study set out to describe and analyze how selected high school principals in Jamaica understand and practice school leadership by exploring how they view their circumstances, and how their meanings of leadership are modified by the contexts of their work. Three guiding questions shaped and directed the research process (a) what meanings do Jamaican principals attach to leadership and why? (b) how are these meanings related to the ways in which they engage in leadership? and (c)in what ways do their definitions of and approaches to leadership practice interact with the contexts within which they live and work?

Theoretical framework

The focus of this study on how Jamaican high school principals understand and engage in school leadership made symbolic interaction (Blumer 1969, Charon 1998, Forte 2001), an appropriate theoretical framework for informing the study's design and methodology. Symbolic interaction implies that reality is not an objective phenomenon, rather it is a function of individuals interacting with their world and that there exist multiple, socially constructed realities that are complex and ever changing. The assumptions underpinning this study's focus were aligned with symbolic interaction and respecting these assumptions meant that in order to understand the phenomenon of interest, the research should seek to unpack the inherent complexities of meaning in context.

Literature Review

In describing literature about school leadership Day et al. (2000, p.14) have referred to "a voluminous literature on leadership…which offers a bewildering array of theories, models, principles and strategies". Bush (2003) too, points to a variety of theories several of which overlap and adds that the discourse of leadership is confusing. In the face of this apparent confusion and mindful of the fact that there exist few studies that examine leadership among Jamaican principals, I drew on three broad, interrelated areas in the field of school leadership. These included: traditional and contemporary theories of educational leadership; studies that define and describe principal leadership; and scholarly work and technical literature on global trends and national policies that have implications for emerging views of what constitutes school leadership. Initially the

literature helped shape the study's focus and informed the design. Later, during analysis, the literature acted as source against which major concepts and relationships between them were examined.

Theories of educational leadership

Theories of educational leadership served as points of reference from which to explore how Jamaican high school principals engage in school leadership and provided a platform on which to situate the study's findings. The nine models presented by Bush (2003) provided a variety of frameworks for understanding school leadership. These range from bureaucratic, managerial conceptions of leadership through to instructional leadership with its focus on teaching and learning to more recent models such as transformational and moral leadership. The latter have sought to move the bureaucratic and managerial focus from centre-stage and balance it with a focus on values, moral authority and capacity for change.

Premised on values, moral leadership asserts that what leaders symbolize and communicate is more important than their style. According to Sergiovanni (1992) moral authority is the power base, "the cornerstone of one's overall leadership practice" (p.139). While not discounting other dimensions of leadership, Sergiovanni places a premium on the moral dimension, arguing that bureaucratic, psychological and technical-rational authority need to be de-emphasized and in their place, moral and professional authority need to be emphasized. The purpose of moral leadership is to increase sensitivity to the "rightness of decisions" thereby increasing participation and creating a more democratic organization and community. The power to make decisions and affect change is distributed throughout the organization and authority and responsibility are shared. Consequently, all members of the community - students, parents, employers and other community representatives - are joined in a coordinated effort to achieve common goals. More recent research also confirms that underpinning the practice of effective school leaders is a strong sense of values and a commitment to moral leadership (Fullan 2003; Law, Walker & Dimmock, 2003; Day & Samsons, 2013). Indeed, Begley (2001) refers to a leader's capacity to employ values to guide decisions and actions as "the artistry of leadership" (p. 364).

Transformational, moral and values-led theories of leadership challenge the assumptions of traditional models that ignore the complexity of leadership and

propose 'one way to lead' type approaches. Leithwood's transformational leadership and Day's theory of values-led contingency leadership were particularly valuable as, in addition to presenting a series of theoretical concepts, they provided empirical data to support these concepts. Furthermore, these models presented managerial and instructional practices as supportive dimensions thus allowing for an integrative, multidimensional understanding of leadership.

Principal leadership

Also important were those empirical studies that have sought to define school leadership by pointing to universal leadership skills, practices and professional knowledge as well as a range of contextual factors in their descriptions of leadership. There is general agreement that effective leaders are predominantly visionary, people-centered, collaborative in their approach and skilled at managing competing tensions and dilemmas (Daresh, Dunlap, Gatner & Hvisdak 1998; Leithwood et al 1999; Ferrandino 2001). While not discounting generalizable characteristics of effective leadership, scholars also acknowledge that what constitutes effective leadership varies from one context to another.

Gronn and Ribbins (1996, p.453) make a case for an interpretive approach to leadership that recognizes the relationship between the individual and context as both implicative and reciprocal and propose a "contextualized perspective". In this connection, Moos, Krejsler and Kofod (2008) point to the importance of local traditions, values and culture when seeking to understand practitioners' interpretations and practice of both education and leadership. In response to research that assumes a Western cultural context, writers such as Walker and Dimmock (2000), Goh (2009), Hallinger and Kantamara (2001), Simkins, Sisum and Memon (2003) examine culture as a crucial component for understanding leadership and they emphasize the principal's ability to modify approaches according to prevailing contextual conditions. In arguing for "leadership as a concept formulated in context", Shah (2010, p.27) demonstrates how cultural and belief systems frame the understanding and practice of school leadership among female Muslim principals in Pakistan.   Concern with how socio-economic conditions differentiate the practice of leadership among principals in what the literature refers to as 'challenging schools' is considered in the work of researchers such as Mulford et al (2008), Harris

(2010), Cistone and Stevenson (2000) and Kimball and Sirotnik (2000). A consistent theme in these combined bodies of work has been the powerful role that cultural and social contexts play in how leadership is interpreted and the need for differentiated approaches to school improvement.

Led by Ball's (1987, p.8) observation that quantitative data alone cannot uncover "street realities", I also drew on studies that advocate a qualitative approach to exploring leadership. Several qualitative research studies acknowledge the importance of principals' underlying ideas, knowledge and beliefs (Southworth1995, Leithwood et al.1999, Day et al. 2000) Others too, recognizing the complexity of school leadership, have tapped into the private worlds of principals to examine how they construct their understandings of leadership (Dimmock & O'Donoghue, 1997; Quong, Walker & Bodycott, 1999). Taken together, these qualitative studies suggest that the complex interplay between principals' perceptions, experiences and actions, their relationships with school community constituents and their responses to the multiple contexts within which they work is important for understanding how principal leadership is defined and practiced. They also emphasize a qualitative approach as a useful pathway for developing an integrative understanding of principal leadership.

School leadership in Jamaica

Policy and reform initiatives are likely to influence how leadership is interpreted. Collectively, the language and content of local policy documents and reports such as the Task Force Report on Educational Reform (2004), the Education Transformation Programme (2010) and the Draft Standards for the Education System in Jamaica (Jamaica Teaching Council, 2011) point to an alignment with several global trends. Chief among these are the creation of standards; a system focused on performance and results; accountability measures aimed at efficiency and cost-effectiveness; as well as increased management responsibilities for principals. As Grace (1995) and Gronn (2003) have pointed out such reforms intensify principals' work and force them to channel their energies into management rather than educational concerns. At the same time, the establishment of a comprehensive and common curriculum for Grades 7-9, as well as societal concerns with students' poor performance in core subjects such as Mathematics and English in local and regional examinations has highlighted

instructional leadership and the principal's responsibility to acquire and manage resources.

Added to this, is an expectation that schools function as community, social and cultural resources especially in light of the collapse of tradition, family and Church which according to Giddens (2000, p.37) have become, "shell institutions … inadequate to the tasks they are called on to perform". Schools, and by implication their principals, are expected to bring community into the schools in the broadest sense by functioning as primary sources of fellowship, support and community spirit. In such a climate of reform with shifting and expanding demands on principals, there are likely to be competing notions and uncertainty within the profession about what school leadership means.

In view of the importance that writers have attached to the power of cultural and contextual influences in relation to leadership, and, given the policy demands impacting on the role of Jamaican principals, I felt that insight into how they conceptualize and experience leadership within their own unique contexts was an area worthy of study. Furthermore, previous studies into aspects of Jamaican principalship have focused on traits, skills, tasks, motivation, job satisfaction and teacher-principal relationships and a recent longitudinal study by Hutton (2010, 2013) points to the characteristics associated with high performing principals in Jamaican schools. The study reported in this paper differs from these studies in that it seeks to problematize the notion of leadership by documenting how principals think and speak about the ways they lead, emphasizing meanings and understanding.

Methodology

Symbolic interaction implies that researchers respect and preserve the voices and emotions of participants, perceive themselves as research instruments and, according to Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p.25), assume "the posture of indwelling". These predispositions are synonymous with an interpretive mode of enquiry (Glesne. 1999; Lincoln & Guba 2000). This study adopted a qualitative case-study design (Merriam 1998); more specifically, it qualified as a collective case study because it selected four principals for study, each of whom was instrumental in learning about school leadership in Jamaica.

The research lent itself to selection of case study as a research strategy for several reasons. First, case study inquiry facilitates concentrating on a single

phenomenon and it attends to context by studying participants in their natural settings engaged in real-life interactions. In addition, it allows for the development of holistic portrayal or what Ryle (cited in Geertz, 1973, p. 6) termed "thick description", thereby extending understanding of how participants interpret their experiences and what is happening to them and within them. Finally, it incorporates several sources of evidence to foster understanding from several perspectives.

Sampling

In order to identify what Patton (1990, p.169) has termed "information-rich cases" and optimize selection of the best people for informing an understanding of school leadership, a purposeful sampling approach was used. Stake (1995, p.6) has advised, "Even for collective case studies, selection by sampling of attributes should not be the highest priority. Balance and variety are important; opportunity to learn is of primary importance". Nomination of participants was based on consultation with the Ministry of Education's six regional directors. To ensure that there was some common understanding of the term 'exemplary school leadership' among the directors, selection criteria were negotiated. These included: evidence of sustained improvement within the school community; capacity to make a difference; receptivity to recent reform initiatives within the secondary system; and wide acknowledgement amongst professional peers of their effectiveness. Additional criteria included at least two years' experience as principal in a public urban high school and current appointment as principal in an urban high school.

From the sixteen nominations received, and in keeping with Patton's (1990, p.186) recommendation that sample size be based on "reasonable coverage of the phenomenon, given the purpose of the study", I selected four. This final selection included one male and three females with experience as principals ranging from two to twenty-four years. All, except one, were in their first principal post and had served at their current schools as vice-principals. None had teaching responsibilities. Two principals worked in all-girls schools and two in co-educational schools in urban centers located in the western and south - central areas of the island as well as the Kingston metropolitan area. I restricted the study to principals of public high schools because in Jamaica, private high schools are not schools of choice; according to Miller (1990, p.359) they function largely as "fallback for children failing to get into the public

high school system". Although all principals in the study worked in the public system their schools' origins and histories were markedly different. One, a trust school founded almost 275 years ago, became part of the public system from as early as 1920; two Roman Catholic Church schools founded in 1925 and 1948 were incorporated into the public system in 1959 and 1958 respectively; and the fourth, a government institution established in 1979, gained high school status in 1988.

Data Collection

According to Freebody (2003, p. 82), "Case studies are empirically omnivorous". Case study data collection is typically multi-method and multi-source and as Charon (1998, p. 233) points out symbolic interaction is "based on a methodology that emphasizes interviewing, observing people act in the real world, and determining how people define the situations they act in". This study sourced data from semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation sessions as well as school and official Ministry of Education documents.

Semi-structured interviews provided a useful means of learning about how principals construct and negotiate the meaning of leadership while gaining insight into events and experiences from their perspectives and in their own words and thus were in keeping with the tenets that constitute a symbolic interaction framework. They provided a balance between getting the principals' perspectives and attending to context by probing for intentions, conditions and strategies. For each principal, in addition to an initial informal meeting, a series of three interviews lasting between 60 and 120 minutes, took place over a two-month period. With three of the four principals, interviews were conducted in their offices during the course of a normal school day and were therefore subject to minor disruptions; however, in the case of one participant, interviews were interruption-free because they did not take place on the school compound. These semi-structured interviews explored questions concerning how the principals understood and experienced their role and function; how they were leading and why they were leading in particular ways; their relationship with the community and other stakeholders; changes in education that were impacting on their work and life in school; their perceptions on the future of the principalship in Jamaica; and the challenges and rewards they were experiencing. All interviews were audiotaped with the participants' permission and researcher-typed

transcripts were later returned to them for modification or addition of material.

Observations provided an opportunity to witness first-hand the interactions of the participants and then ask them in interviews about the meanings of their actions. In this study each principal was observed for several hours over the course of four to six visits. Every effort was made to conduct observations involving both individual and group face-to-face interactions with a variety of stakeholders, in formal and informal situations - teachers, students, parents, administrative and ancillary staff, board members, Ministry personnel, community members, past students at meetings, functions and outdoor events, in staffrooms, offices and on verandahs.

Like observation data, documents can corroborate, extend understanding or lead the researcher to query data gleaned from interviews. They also provide "historical and contextual dimensions" (Glesne, 1999, p.59) to interviews and observations. A variety of documents related to the principal's role were reviewed; these included official documents such as job descriptions, school guidelines and policies, principals' annual reports, and excerpts from school development plans as well as less official documents such as letters to the editor of a national newspaper written by or about the principals who participated in this study. In addition, with the principals' permission, some "unpremeditated documents" (Borg & Gall, 1989, p. 813) such as correspondence between the principals and members of their school community, were examined. These documents were a valuable source of learning how people felt about what was happening in their schools and how it was impacting on them.

Data analysis

Merriam (1998, p. 193) describes the goal of data analysis in case studies as "communicating understanding". In order to arrive at such an "understanding", I analyzed data using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory modes of analysis, specifically the systematic processes referred to as open and axial coding. Mindful of Merriam's (1998) position that collective case study research demands analysis at two levels, I used both within-and cross-case analyses. In addition to analyzing the data for each case using the procedures described above, I used cross-case analysis to identify patterns that extended beyond the individual case. I compared and contrasted the themes and categories between and

among cases to discover how the principals' perspectives were similar and different and why. As Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 29) have observed, collective case study design combined with grounded theory methods of analysis increases the possibility of "…understanding a single-case finding, grounding it, by specifying *how* and *where* and if possible, *why* it carries on as it does".

Lincoln and Guba (2000), Merriam (1998), and Stake (1995) have identified verification procedures, several of which featured in this study: verbatim transcription, triangulation, member checking, and detailed records of data collection and analysis procedures. The use of multiple sources and data collection methods served to minimize the threat to trustworthiness. Interview responses were compared with data from observations and documents. Member checking was employed when I returned transcribed interviews and drafts of cases to the principals for validation.

Findings

Findings from the within-case analysis were presented as four individual cases that provided an understanding of how each principal conceptualizes and practices leadership within his or her respective context. In the first case entitled *Mother of the Poor*, the principal, Norma Wilson, defines school leadership as the pursuit of excellence within a framework of valuing and caring for students. Principal Margaret Russell at the centre of the second case, *The Reculturing Principal,* portrays leadership as transforming school culture so that it is receptive to change and committed to growth and improvement. The principal featured in the third case, Kenton Edwards, understands leadership as a response to students' social problems, their diminished self-concept and dysfunctional community relationships – hence the title *The Principal as Social Architect*. The final case presents Audrey Grant, *The Community Principal,* who conceptualizes leadership in terms of building caring, co-operative relationships among all involved in the schooling process with a view to developing community connectedness. Collectively, these four cases provided the body of data used to inform the study's cross-case analysis. In an effort to remain grounded in the particular, even while abstracting more general themes that cut across cases, findings from the cross-case analysis are prefaced with a summary of the dominant features as well as the salient concepts and processes embodied in each principal's conceptualization of school leadership. These are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 *Summary of Participants' Conceptualizations of School Leadership*

	Mother of the Poor	Reculturing Principal	Social Architect	Community Principal
Core values	Care & protection of the disadvantaged Academic excellence	Respect for others Growth, improvement & lifelong learning Collaborative relationships	Care Student identity development Social responsibility Student achievement	Love & care Co-operative relationships Community service
Purpose of leadership	To promote excellence by minimizing circumstances that militate against student achievement	To enable improvement & continuous learning through transforming school culture	To add value to students' lives by developing their personal, academic and social capital & student learning.	To effect school improvement through building a sense of community
Dominant emphasis	Initiatives that cater to students' moral, psychological, economic and academic needs. Improved school performance.	Attitudes that nurture a culture receptive to change Reforms geared towards improved teaching & learning.	Dismantling psycho-social barriers that prevent academic success Experiences that promote identity development, self-discipline & student learning	A network of positive, productive relation-ships. Creating & sustaining community - mindedness
Major conceptual categories	Caring for students Creating a culture of excellence	Shaping the vision Realizing the vision	Building student morale Improving behavior & academic performance	Reaching in to deepen internal relationships Stretching out to broaden community relationships

	Mother of the Poor	Reculturing Principal	Social Architect	Community Principal
Key concepts	Students' well-being & total development; Student safety & protection; Inspiring hope; Academic achievement; Improved teaching & learning; Goal setting & accountability Resource management	Personal vision; Shared vision; Inspiring trust & commitment; Collaboration; Structures & policies that support vision; Improved academic performance; Professional development; Balancing tensions	Sensitivity to context; Caring relationships; High expectations; Positive self-concept & school image; Student empowerment; Practical discipline; Improved grades	Quality relationships Service to others; Shared leadership; Cohesion; Reciprocity; School as a community resource Community as a school resource

Cross-case analysis identified patterns that extended beyond the individual cases and revealed four findings into how the principals in this study conceptualize leadership. These findings are (a) the principals' understandings of leadership are primarily moral; (b) their leadership practices are organized around a set of common values that embody moral purpose; (c) their leadership is sensitive to and interacts with a range of overlapping contexts; and, (d) differences in personal and school community contexts account for variations in their leadership emphases and practices.

The principals' understandings of leadership are primarily moral

All four principals in this study conceptualize their understanding of leadership in moral terms. They are driven by a sense of mission and a belief in the power of education to improve their students' prospects. For example Norma Wilson says: "I figure this is my work for the country – these children have good minds but they have poor circumstances. We must educate people in the ghetto from the parents, right up, not just the children but the parents too". Similarly Kenton Edwards is confident that he has "something to offer", that he "can make a difference". He explains, "You love education because of what it can do for people and because of also your concern for people, poor people in your society".

Two of the principals are quite explicit about school leadership as a moral undertaking. Audrey Grant describes school leadership as a service: "We are here to serve. …. It's a service we are rendering that we hope …. will change their lives eventually" while Kenton Edwards believes that,

"as the principal you have to be aware of … the social problems in society, the kind of attitudes that are displayed in society and ask yourself do you want this to continue five, ten years in this society?" Although less explicit, there are moral overtones running through Margaret Russell's idea that leadership is "… about professional development and personal development … better practices … and higher grades and more responsible students too but it's also about influencing attitudes and building character and moving students and teachers to another level…". She adds: "As a principal I am entrusted with the responsibility of shaping the future of other people's children for the better …". In explaining to me why she is called 'Mother of the Poor', Norma Wilson describes her leadership as encompassing the functions of a family: attending not only to students' educational needs but also to their economic well-being, as well as their physical and emotional, psychological and spiritual development. Like a mother who wants the best for her children and does all in her power to facilitate their successes, she believes that school leadership is about minimizing and overcoming circumstances that militate against the achievement of excellence and creating, "the best schools we can".

Their practices also endorse these comments and in different ways they demonstrate a commitment to finding solutions to social problems and inequities that interfere with students' potential to succeed. All four principals support special measures for poor students through a variety of welfare program which provide assistance with breakfast, lunch, transport, textbook, uniform and examination fees. Their commitment to address social

problems extends to disadvantaged groups outside of the school; at Audrey Grant's school, I observed residents from nearby communities accessing reduced-cost and in some cases free tuition on the evening school program. Margaret Russell's school accommodates teenage mothers from the local Women's Centre who wish to continue their formal education. Furthermore, they seek to carry students beyond the limitations imposed by the deprivation and violence in their normal lives. Norma Wilson solicits contributions from past students, donor agencies and the private sector in order to provide students with a wide range of extra-curricular activities, opportunities to travel abroad, to attend local cultural events and visit points of interest; through these means she seeks to expose students from deprived backgrounds to experiences that their middle-class counterparts benefit from as a matter of course. Mrs. Grant's concern about how her school could address the needs of students whose parents or relatives had been incarcerated and those who had lost relatives and friends violently, was aimed at addressing social disparities and further illustrates the moral fabric of her thinking.

Their leadership practices are organised around values that embody moral purpose

Data indicate that values are at the core of their leadership. For Margaret Russell, values give meaning to her leadership: "School is about life and life doesn't go on without values". In one interview she explains how her vision is anchored in what she refers to as "the underlying" – a platform of guiding values that includes respect for self and others, collaborative relationships, self-discipline and honesty - values she not only articulates but strives to model. She reasons, "I can't convince people of a need to change or a need to do something different if I do not demonstrate integrity …." For Audrey Grant values are part of her religious ethic: "I am a Christian who lives by Christian values and I take these with me into the work place … it is who I am, at home and at school".

As Table 1 illustrates, all principals articulated personal and professional values that informed the purpose, emphases and key concepts associated with their leadership. Care and respect for all members of the school community featured most prominently. According to Audrey Grant, "This job means loving people … you've got to love people to be close to them". In a similar vein, Kenton Edwards remarks, "Love is important … love for people, for your staff, for your students". Margaret Russell emphasizes the importance of respect: "Unless you respect persons you're not valuing their opinions … so you will not get very far with growth as a school". Norma Wilson declares, "I have a fundamental belief in respect, in showing respect to all. I tell the students, my teachers too, regardless of background or intellectual abilities you must value everyone as a person".

As an extension to care and respect, social justice and excellence were also deemed important values. An emphasis on excellence surfaced several times throughout the interviews. Mrs. Wilson's desire for the students "to be the very best they can in everything they do", her exhortation to her students, "we have to aim for excellence so you need to do more than the average", and Margaret Russell's comment, "I don't like mediocrity in anything at all so excellence is a must" illustrate the importance they attach to excellence.

These common values - care and respect, social justice and excellence – were embedded in the visions they held for their schools and were observed being woven into their interactions and leadership practices. For example, engaging in dialogue to develop a shared vision with the school community; encouraging collaboration and shared decision-making; attending to student safety and welfare; and promoting practices that preserve relationships, clearly articulate with care and respect. Practices that focus on building students' social and academic capital, and reducing inequities spring from a commitment to social justice; while attending to teachers' professional development, monitoring student progress and communicating high expectations are practices that embody a commitment to excellence.

Furthermore, the principals in this study presented values as the compass that guided their decisions and actions even when such actions challenged Ministry of Education mandates. For example, Margaret Russell initially set aside the Ministry directive for formal implementation of teacher appraisal; she postponed full implementation because she believed her teachers were not ready to benefit from the process and, for her, care and respect had to supersede efficiency and accountability. Similarly, she mediated the policy on staff cuts. Even though she reduced her staff cohort by two, the school was still overstaffed according to the Ministry's formula. However, she resisted further cuts, explaining that cutting staff would result in limiting the range of subjects on offer, thereby compromising the quality education she was providing her students. She was not uncomfortable about her response because as an economically driven policy it contradicted her commitment to care and excellence. Likewise, the primacy of care and excellence overrode compliance and bureaucratic concerns when Norma Wilson responded to the Ministry of Education's standard curriculum for all Grade 7-9 students. Unconvinced that on its own the standard curriculum was sufficient to maintain top quality, she worked with her staff to incorporate content beyond what was recommended. She explained: "In my opinion, the methodology is good but the content is deficient as it is written for the average child and ... Morrow Park is not an average school."

Their leadership is sensitive to and interacts with a range of overlapping contexts

Observations and interviews also revealed that the dynamics of personal, school-community and policy contexts influenced how these principals defined and interpreted school leadership. Their personal responses to past experience predisposed them to think about leadership in certain ways. Audrey Grant for example, referred to the combination of her Christian values framework and professional experience, firstly as a young teacher in an inner city Kingston school, then as a vice-principal working closely with parents, to account for her community-minded orientation. Margaret Russell explained how her early socialization, involvement in religious life and her training as a nun converged to impact on her approach to leadership: "…so in terms of accepting myself, knowing what my strengths were as person, knowing what I could manage and couldn't manage, a lot of that came from my own training, my own formation and my early years as a sister"

One of the strongest influences on their leadership was the school-community context. Audrey Grant very clearly associates the way she thinks about and practices leadership with the location of the school and the nature of the surrounding community: "The thing that has had the greatest impact on me as a principal here is the community itself, the depressed community…". In particular school-community conditions trigger specific leadership emphases. For example, Kenton Edwards found a student body whose self-worth was being eroded by negative images, low expectations and a social perception of inferiority. His response to this was to become 'a social architect' by focusing his leadership on dismantling the barriers that impeded students' development, providing them with opportunities to develop social capital, improving behavior and academic performance and thereby rebuilding community confidence in the school. Similarly, Margaret Russell's emphasis on growth and improvement through shared vision, trust and collaborative relationships is a direct response to a context in which she recognized "a sort of drifting ….a despondency brought about by lack of direction and motivation" and a school-community who "in their hearts … don't believe that things can be different".

Social climate colored how these principals interpreted their leadership responsibilities. All of them spoke of the socio-economic and political realities associated with working in an environment where so many of the problems affecting their students are embedded within a culture of partisan politics, political violence and

garrison communities[1]. One of the social challenges consistently referred to in the interviews was violence. All of the principals referred to Jamaica's unacceptable levels of social, political and domestic violence in explaining their commitment to anti-violence. Kenton Edwards described his alarm at the climbing murder rate and how he arrived at the decision to start "preaching peace and love": "As principal of a school with so many young people I need to do something, and as a Jamaican too". Whether explicitly declaring a "zero tolerance" policy on violence as Sr. Margaret did, introducing students to the self-discipline and conflict resolution techniques associated with "practical discipline" as Kenton Edwards did or demonstrating caring leadership as they all did, the principals' leadership practices were designed to suppress the culture of violence and promote a climate of discipline.

To a lesser extent the policy context too, entered into these principals' understanding of leadership. Although none of the principals singled out policy as a defining influence on their leadership, they did refer to curriculum reform, performance and other policy issues. Their sensitivity to Ministry expectations is evident in school documents such as Mission statements and school development plans. Norma Wilson's repeated reference to her school development plan and to herself as "the accountable officer"; Audrey Grant's comment that she is "answerable for what is going on"; and Kenton Edwards' observation that the Ministry is "pushing us to behave like a company or a business", leave little doubt that the policy context encouraged a concern for accountability and the use of

management rhetoric. Although the policy context entered into their understanding and was implicated to some extent in their practices, it did not compromise their value commitments. Margaret Russell's response to the Ministry's policy on teacher appraisal and staff cuts and Norma Wilson's response to the national curriculum for Grades 7-9 described in the previous section suggest that the policy context did not control their leadership. Both principals adapted policy directives so that they were aligned with their value commitments to care and excellence.

Differences in personal and school community contexts account for variation in their leadership emphases.

In examining how these four principals interacted with personal, school-community and policy contexts, the cross case analysis revealed that although they worked in similar policy and social contexts, their personal and immediate school and community contexts differed. It was these differences and how they interacted that accounted, to a large extent, for the variation in their leadership emphases. Although Norma Wilson and Kenton Edwards both lead public schools that are approximately the same size, both report that 80 percent of their students come from underprivileged and depressed areas, and both face similar social challenges, in many important respects, their contexts are quite different and this has implications for how they experience their leadership. For example, they do not experience under-resourcing to the same degree. Norma Wilson has a track record of more than 20 years as a principal and heads a school that is over 275 years old, while Kenton Edwards has less than six years in the post and his school is less than 20 years old. By virtue of her reputation as an educator, the trust and respect she has earned over the years with parents and the private sector, her school's Trust Fund, and a strong past students' association, Norma Wilson had access to non-government sources of money and social influence that Kenton Edwards does not have. Margaret Russell and Audrey Grant both lead public schools too but their schools

[1] The garrison community is a post-independence socio-political feature that grew out of the Michael Manley and Edward Seaga prime-ministerial regimes of the 1970s and 1980s. The term refers to any depressed community that displays fierce loyalty to one political party, identifies strongly with the party leader and uses voter manipulation and electoral rigging to determine political outcomes. Typically, garrisons are autonomous, ruled by 'dons' and gang leaders who control entry to the community as well as access to and distribution of resources and benefits.

continue to enjoy links with the Roman Catholic Church that founded them and this affiliation has supplemented their resource base and provided opportunities that they have optimised in a way that Kenton Edwards could not.

Discussion

While all four principals were governed by a set of relatively stable common values, they applied them to their leadership in individual ways, modifying their approaches and emphases in response to a combination of contexts that were both dynamic and unique. The title attributed to each principal together with the constructs in Table 1 that describe their conceptualisation of school leadership illustrates that these principals adjusted their leadership to suit the contextual conditions of their individual schools. Their personal and professional values informed their leadership emphases; the changes they embarked on arose out of their values; however, context determined how they translated these values into action. As a result, they differed in the degree to which they practised visionary, human relations, instructional or transformational leadership.

Notwithstanding these differences, there is a sense in which the diversity of emphases and practices are more a matter of degree or extent than substance. As Table 1 illustrates, the principals present a number of shared practices and integrate several orientations. What is a dominant strategy for one principal is a supportive strategy for another. Although no one principal emerges as an instructional leader, they all practise instructional leadership – each stresses professional development, is concerned about curriculum and monitors student achievement. Neither do any of them emerge with a predominantly managerial orientation, yet they are all concerned about managerial issues especially finance, acquisition of resources and academic accountability. These findings point to moral leadership, values-led leadership and leadership artistry as interconnected constructs useful for understanding how these principals conceptualise school leadership.

Morally grounded leadership

Three discernible features of the principals' conceptualizations lead to the conclusion that their leadership is morally grounded. Firstly, their drive to lead proceeds from a conviction, that as educational leaders, they are committed to serving and making a difference to their school communities. In different ways, all four principals communicated and demonstrated a moral commitment to serve Jamaica's children and their school communities. Such a conviction provides them with a stable perspective from which to justify decisions and actions. In addition, they all understood that their role as school leaders required them to generate, safeguard and promote a shared vision for their schools. They shared a sense of obligation to serve their communities and protect a set of moral ideals. When considered alongside their views about the purpose and the desired outcomes of leadership, this position suggests a general orientation to moral leadership - theory that stresses the importance of leaders' personal values (Sergiovanni, 1992, 2001; Fullan, 2003). Moral leaders encourage community members to adhere to these values, focus on humanistic concerns and are committed to creating more democratic societies through capacity building in others.

Added to this, they consistently describe and explain leadership in terms of moral purpose. Although the titles attached to the cases point to a range of leadership purposes, each purpose has a moral focus. As 'Mother of the Poor', Norma Wilson works to alleviate the conditions that impede student growth and academic achievement; as 'The Reculturing Principal', Margaret Russell seeks to develop people through transforming her school's culture; Kenton Edwards, 'The Principal as Social Architect', takes responsibility for addressing moral and social issues and developing students' social and academic capital; and 'The Community Principal', Audrey Grant, is concerned with building community in order to create a socially well-adjusted society. In addition, the leadership concepts that the principals considered to be important listed in Table 1, connote a shared commitment to student

growth, school improvement and community development - ends that are predominantly moral – through caring relationships, dialogue and collaboration - means that are predominantly moral. As Sergiovanni (1999, p. 24) has pointed out, "The embodiment of purpose and the development of followership are inescapably moral".

Leadership as values-driven

The second finding into how principals conceptualize school leadership focuses on the role of values. Recognizing the moral issues and consequences inherent in leadership, the principals in this study anchor their behavior, interactions and decisions in the dominant values of care, social justice and excellence. The view that values play a crucial role in how principals conceptualize and interpret school leadership is not new (Day et al., 2000, Gold, Evans, Earley, Halpin & Collarbone 2003, Law et al., 2003). Because their practices are organized around values and not externally imposed mandates, they reject practices that they consider to be incongruent with their value commitments. In this way, their values act as standards for guiding decisions especially when faced with competing demands. In this respect, the relationship between the values and leadership of principals' in this study reflects Law et al.'s (2003, p.505) proposition that "values act as powerful motivators or filters that predispose principals towards seeing situations in certain ways and taking certain courses of action".

Leadership artistry

The third finding calls attention to the relationship between leadership and a range of contextual dynamics. The view that context is significant and that the situation is complicated for principals by overlays of cultural norms and expectations from a variety of internal and external sources has been acknowledged in other studies (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001; Moos, Krejsler & Kofod, 2008; Shah, 2010). However, while the contexts in and through which the principals work are dynamic and fluid, their

values are stable. Layered onto these principals' interactions with context was an abiding commitment to the values of care, social justice and excellence. Their leadership practices were not unduly constrained by external policy as Southworth (1999) observed. The principals' willingness to step outside bureaucratic arrangements and their flexible interpretation of policy are manifestations of a capacity to uphold their value commitments. Strachan (1999) observed a similar disposition among principals in New Zealand who preserved their value systems by remaining student-focused and resisting the pressure to adopt the managerial imperatives favored by neo-liberal reforms.

The final finding into how the principals in this study conceptualize leadership reinforces the significance of context - although the four principals shared similar values that set the direction for their leadership and suggested certain kinds of practices, these values did not particularize practices. Because the principals' leadership was sensitive to and continually interacting with overlapping contextual influences, they molded and refined their practices in individualized ways, adapting general approaches to their specific circumstances. This supports the concept of leadership artistry posited by Deal and Peterson (2000) and Begley (2001). Even when contexts such as external policy and social climate are common, the experience of leadership can never be the same for any two principals because the interplay of issues related to personal context, needs of the community, local politics and fixed features such as core values and a school's history, complicate events and interactions, making each relationship unique.

That all four principals subscribed to similar values yet selected various leadership emphases and integrated a range of approaches in response to and as a result of the interplay of internal and external contexts, suggests that there is much credibility in Simkins et al's.(2003) argument that universalistic, off-the-shelf prescriptions are short-sighted. Goh's (2009, p.339) conclusion that leadership theories are "culture bound" and Dimmock and Walker's (2000, p.147) warning about the dangers attached to "cultural borrowing of educational policies and practices" are

especially relevant. As Foskett and Lumby (2003, p. 193) observe, "There can be no universal pattern. Context matters. Culture matters."

Implications and Conclusion

Understanding what and how principals with a reputation for success think about school leadership, how they lead, and the extent to which their understandings and realities are implicated in their leadership approaches, are prerequisites if deliberations about the preparation of future school leaders are to be informed. Findings from this study are relevant for Jamaican educators currently engaged in designing educational leadership programs for aspiring principals as part of the Ministry of Education's National Leadership College. Without local data, local input, and a clear sense of what Sergiovanni (1992, p. 1) terms "the voice of practice", there is a danger that the pedagogical shape and content of any emerging leadership program may simply mimic the characteristics of successful programs elsewhere.

In view of the centrality of moral purpose and values to principals' conceptualization of leadership, professional education and training should provide opportunities for principals and prospective principals to examine their personal and professional values and how these relate to their personal constructions of leadership. The finding that aspects of context interact with principals' leadership suggests that leadership education should encourage principals to examine not only how their leadership responds to contextual dynamics but also the extent to which their moral purpose as leaders supersedes contextual demands.

The findings are also relevant to researchers in the field. Future research that offers a comparison between the current study's population and other populations may unveil a different kind of conceptualization of leadership. One wonders about the extent to which other high school principals in Jamaica undertake leadership in ways that are similar to or different from the four principals in this study. In order to determine whether Norma Wilson, Margaret Russell, Kenton Edwards and Audrey Grant are unique or similar to other principals, the understandings and experiences of leadership held by other principals need to be explored. Follow-up studies that look at a more varied sample of principals would complement this research. Another area concerns principals who are not necessarily considered exemplary as the participants in this study were deemed to be. Do best practice principals hold different constructions of leadership from others? Research dedicated to exploring this question would be useful. Gathering more evidence concerning common ways of thinking about and practicing leadership and contextual factors that explain individual variation is likely to yield a more comprehensive understanding of leadership in Jamaican schools.

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