What Being a Successful Principal Really Means:

An International Perspective

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> *Abstract: This paper presents an international perspective on successful principals. Data from the International Successful School Principals' Project, now in its sixth year and presently in eight nations and over sixty schools, along with a critical review of the international literature on successful principals provide the basis for a discussion of both similarities and dissimilarities across nations. A strong values orientation relating to clear instrumental and broad moral purposes, along with other similar attributes, qualities, and strategies, recur as common denominators. Five combinations of these are identified. However, the relative emphases which are placed upon their use varies according to the principals' or their schools' phase of development and the demands of the broader policy and demographic contexts.*

Introduction

In conducting research into the school principalship over a number of years, it is possible to identify the ways in which social and policy contexts that affect the learning and working conditions in schools change and, with

these, their effects upon the leadership roles of principals. The ways in which successful principals and their staff respond to the challenges of continuing to focus upon engaging students in learning while planning for and implementing an increasing number of changes related to external change or reform agendas reflect professionalism of a high order. For such principals and their staff, both moral and instrumental purposes and successes are defined more by internal accountability (Elmore, 2006) for high standards than by the often temporary and ill thought out ideologies of policy makers. This is not only true in the United Kingdom, but in most other countries around the world. These successful principals and their staff are not obdurate, inflexible resisters to change. On the contrary, they embrace it, so long as in their professional judgment, it adds value to the education of all the students in their schools. In doing so, they demonstrate sustained commitment and passion for their work under what are often intellectually and emotionally challenging circumstances. More importantly, they demonstrate resilience over time (Giles, 2006; Day & Gu, 2007).

This discussion of what we know about the ways in which successful principals lead and manage forms the substance of this short, critical overview of what being a successful principal (really) means right now. These data come from two key sources: (i) the International Successful School Principals' Project (ISSPP), now in its sixth year and involving more than sixty schools in eight countries (Day & Leithwood, 2007); and (ii) a critical international literature review of the research on successful principal leadership (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006). The discussion will build upon these by proposing that there is no one model for the successful principalship. Rather, successful principals possess a strong and well articulated values orientation that is related to clear instrumental and broad moral purposes where not only is the functional for the sake of the personal, and the personal achieved through the functional, but the influence of the personal on the functional is transformative of it (MacMurray, 1961). In achieving success, principals draw upon a range of qualities, strategies and skills and apply combinations of these differentially according to their values, diagnosis of current contextual needs and future aspirations in order to ensure that their schools are both morally and instrumentally successful.

Successful Principals: The Limits of Research

Successful principals exist in all countries. Yet even now relatively little is known about what constitutes success (as distinct from effective-

ness) and how success is achieved and sustained in different cultures and in different socio-economic contexts.

Success includes, but is more than, effectiveness. Whereas the latter (associated with observable behaviors and outcomes which are quantifiable), is always part of the former, the former is not necessarily a part of the latter. In general, we may say that "effectiveness" is associated with instrumental outcomes of students (tests, examination results), whereas success is associated with these in addition to positive personal and social outcomes, well-being, and equity. In others words, success is more all encompassing, more complex to discern than the sets of bullet points, good advice, and other indicators so readily available from the plethora of school effectiveness research, policy documents, and training and development program documentation. Indeed, such lists are more often than not statements of the obvious. For example, schools will always need leaders with moral purposes, who are "strong" and "purposeful" with teaching and learning at the heart of their leadership agendas. While it is difficult to disagree with these and other claims about principal leadership which emerge from research into effective schools, in themselves they reveal only the *outer* workings of the successful principal. Though important, they only tell one-half of the story.

If we are to understand what being a successful principal really means, we must drill beneath the outer, visible, layer to uncover more detailed knowledge of their work in schools which are in different developmental phases and in different social contexts. Aside from small scale qualitative case study projects, few projects have attempted, for example, to investigate principals' lives over time, or ways in which they work to motivate and engage staff, students, and the community and to sustain commitment. Among them, from an organizational learning perspective, the LOLSO project in Australia revealed associations between leadership and student outcomes (Silins & Mulford, 2004); and Day and his colleagues conducted a multi-perspective study of successful headteachers in English schools (Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley, & Beresford, 2000). The study by Sugrue (2005) and colleagues of principals in European countries is one of the few which have conducted life history studies of school leaders. More recently, analysis of the literature internationally resulted in seven research-based strong claims that can reasonably be made about successful principal leadership. They are not claimed to be strong in the same way, but "all find support in varying amounts of quite robust empirical evidence" (Leithwood et al, 2006). These claims are:

> 1. School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning. As far as we are aware, there is not a single

documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership.

2. Almost all school leaders draw upon the same repertoire of basic practices (building vision and setting directions; understanding and developing people; redesigning and re-culturing the organization; and managing the instructional program). The assumptions are that (a) the central task of leadership is to help improve employee performance and (b) such performance is a function of employees' beliefs, values, motivations, skills, and knowledge and the conditions in which they work.

3. The ways in which leaders apply these basic leadership practices—not the practices themselves—demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work. Successful leaders apply contextually sensitive combinations of the basic leadership practices to their workplaces.

4. School leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions.

5. School leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed. There are "indirect effects of total leadership" (i.e., the combined influence of leadership from all sources) on student learning and achievement through its direct effects on the three dimensions of staff performance (i.e., capacity, motivation and commitment, and working conditions). This accounts for two to three times higher variation in student achievement than is typically reported in studies of headteacher effects.

6. Some patterns of distribution are more effective than others, especially those which are aligned with the agreed vision for the school and in which responsibility, accountabilities, and sense of ownership are present. Such coordinated patterns of leadership practice are associated with more beneficial organizational outcomes.

7. A small handful of personal traits (rather than charisma) explain a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness; the most successful leaders are open-minded and ready to learn from others. They are also flexible rather than dogmatic in their thinking within a system of core values, persistent (e.g., in pursuit of high expectations of staff motivation, commitment, learning and achievement for all), resilient, and optimistic.

Yet while these claims are clearly authoritative, even they do not reveal the tensions and dilemmas, nor the kinds of personal and professional stresses which must be managed during the processes of leading schools successfully in the changing social, political, and policy landscapes.

Changing Landscapes

Schools in the USA and England have for some time been subject to persistent and radical reform interventions by governments in the name of raising standards of teaching, learning and achievement, and reducing social inequities. The iniquitous *No Child Left Behind* (2001) in the USA and the "naming and shaming" of schools which fail to reach national student test and examination baseline targets in England are the most visible top layers of much deeper performance and standards agendas. These exist in various forms now in many countries and intensify, diversify, problematize and sometimes divert the intellectual, social, and emotional work which is fundamental to the moral and instrumental purposes of principals and teachers. The analyses of why and how this "new public management regime" developed (Fielding, 2001; Clarke & Newmann, 1997) and its effects have been rehearsed many times and so need not be elaborated here. They can be read in the writings of luminaries such as Darling-Hammond (1994) and Apple (2005) in the USA; Ozga (1995), Ball (2001), Beck (1999), and Whitty (2002) in England; and Smyth (2001) and Sachs (2003) in Australia. These authors identify results driven, performance climates as reducing teachers' ability to take decisions about the achievement and well being of their students and causing the "technicism", "deprofessionalization" or "reprofessionalization" of teachers (Hargreaves and Goodson, 1996). They see teachers (and, therefore, principals) as becoming more compliant in "delivering" education performance which is defined by the use of a relatively narrow range of results and teaching routines and quantifiable, generalizable attainment criteria rather than process driven pedagogies; and they characterize the situation as a "struggle for the soul" of education (Ball, 2001). Evidence in support of this view can be seen in England through a comprehensive national external student testing and school inspection "surveillance" regime, government initiated curriculum reform, a quasi market of parental choice and, through this, higher transparency. Alongside these are the social justice agendas demonstrated in England and elsewhere through inclusion policies for schools; and in the USA through the Brown ruling on integrated services. While the ideological policy bandwagon rolls on, principals and their staff find themselves being held publicly accountable, more than

ever before, for both the intellectual, emotional, and social well being of their students. Concerns by governments about citizenship in an era of increasing fractures across society as a whole (Fukuyama, 1999) are matched by growing disillusionment of many students now with the formal education system. Increased absenteeism and deteriorating levels of motivation and classroom behavior among a significant minority of students are phenomenon which affect schools' capacities to provide the best possible education to all their students in almost every country.

Although such extremes are not evident in all countries, aspects of them are. The point is that principals' work is carried out in rapidly shifting political and not entirely socially benign environments which are unprecedented. To be successful, principals have always had to manage the demands of a range of stakeholders, but in the twenty-first century, these stakeholders have more power to influence and intervene. Schools are not only more transparent but are, by proxy, peopled with the ideas and ideologies of a greater range of external stakeholders than ever before. Negative consequences are that in some schools in some states in the USA, as in Africa, Asia, and South America, children are being taught by unqualified teachers; that there are crises of recruitment and retention (Moore-Johnson, 2004); and that inequalities are growing (Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki, & Giles, 2005). In England, as in many other countries, there are problems of recruiting principals and, given that approximately 40% are likely to retire in the next 10 years, there is an issue of succession planning. Furthermore, governments which are driven to jockey for position in the international league tables may not always prioritize resources for the arts and humanities, so the learning opportunities for students are increasingly likely to favor vocational curricula which are focused upon achieving measurable outcomes rather than broad educationally oriented curricula and pedagogies. A recent survey of 5600 teachers engaged in the NCLB agenda in 50 States (Rust & Meyers, 2007) found that it was perceived to, "force them to teach to the test, preventing them from meeting the needs of all their students." Its emphasis on high stakes testing was "not working" and, far from improving their work, it was perceived to be contributing to increased stress and burnout. Little wonder that alienation from formal schooling by students and teachers is on the increase.

Sustaining the Inner and Outer Worlds of Successful Principalship

Of course, alongside these difficult challenges are beacons of hope. There are "professional development schools," "professional learning communities" (Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007), school-school and school-

university networks (Veuglers & O'Hair, 2005), communities of practice (Wenger, 1999), participatory action research, networks, and other capacity building endeavors (Veuglers & O'Hair, 2005). However, these rely at the very least upon the tacit support of the principal and are at their best when the principal is an understanding, active advocate, facilitator, and participant. Yet to manage the complexities of policy, community, and staff and student demands and needs successfully requires principals with clear values, vision, commitment, and resilience and a wide range of knowledge (including self knowledge), strategic, technical, and human relating qualities and skills which are able to be sustained.

Establishing organizational structures and resolving technical problems so that the school operates efficiently are management functions. Influencing the creation and continuing development of cultures of learning and achievement for the well-being of all—assuming that this is the fundamental mission of all principals everywhere—requires the leadership of principals who are *skilled diagnosticians*, who are able to *think conceptually* by identifying patterns within complexity and ambiguities; who possess or are able to develop high levels of *self-awareness and emotional and social understandings* (since classrooms and staff rooms are emotional arenas and effective teaching and learning requires the heart, the hand, and the head (Sergiovanni, 2001); are able to distribute leadership in which, ultimately *responsibilities are associated with the power* of decision-making and exercise *"intelligent trust"* through supporting others rather than operating on a model in which people are not to be trusted (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

> Logic and reason, as important as they are, are not the be all and end all. Unless you deal with how people feel about things, logic and reasoning do not matter. No one is going to buy into what you are leading unless you get past their feelings or emotions. I have always been a very logical and reasoning person, and this is not enough. I always thought that it was, but it is not. (Experienced Principal)

Successful principals combine their work within the school with a commitment to and skills in working with a range of parents and other stakeholders from outside the school in strategic partnerships, coalitions, and networks in order to acquire and share resources (of and with the community)—a form of "*relational agency*." Essential in changing times is also the possession of *creative imagination and curiosity* in order to respond to what Heifetz (1994) has called, "the adaptive challenge" defined as a problem for which solutions lie outside the norms of existing solutions and practices.

Like successful teachers, successful principals have *commitment*

and resilience and promote these positive qualities and dispositions in others. Positive emotions are likely to fuel resilience—a key quality in principals and teachers who are able to sustain their commitment to managing the inevitable fluctuations in the policy, social, and personal contexts which they face over a career.

> Through experiences of positive emotions…people transform themselves, becoming more creative, knowledgeable, resilient, socially integrated and healthy individuals. (Frederickson, 2004, p. 1369)

Principals who succeed over time may not necessarily possess all of these qualities themselves. Indeed, it would be surprising if they did. Even if they do they will not always be developed to the same degree, however, they will ensure that key members of the school collectively will do so. Moreover, they will know the importance of leadership commitment, continuity, and progression to sustaining organizational success. They will also be able to identify leadership potential.

A recent study by the Hay Group, a global management consulting firm that works with leaders from education and business communities, identified that a generation (34%) of senior leadership across all sectors in the developed world "could retire today," but that there were, at present, insufficient numbers available to replace them. This is certainly the case in England where it has been reported that only 4% of teachers plan to become headteachers (Guardian, 2003), that only 37% of schools have a formal process for identifying potential of staff, and only 24% of staff actively manage their careers. Successful leaders do not wait for a crisis to happen; rather, they try to "future proof" their schools against decline.

In other words, they will plan *for the sustained success* of the school through "continuity of leadership, unity of purpose, the ongoing socialization and empowerment of committed teachers, and a supportive commitment or active engagement with the democratic process" (Giles, 2007).

> The way schools treat potential and the steps they take to ensure people with the capability and desire to become leaders succeed, matters more than ever. (Hay Group, 2007)

To begin to understand the realities of principals' work we must acknowledge the interaction within and between their inner and outer worlds and between the role of cognition and the role of emotion; and we must take into account the different and changing contexts of their work. The International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP) seeks to do just this, and to identify both similarities and dissimilarities in the conditions and work of successful principals across eight

countries. Its initial case study findings are reported elsewhere (Day & Leithwood, 2007), but what is of particular interest in these is that while all successful principals seemed to possess a core set of virtues, qualities and skills, regardless of cultural contexts, there were differences in their application–and these related largely to: (i) the socio-economic contexts of their schools; and (ii) the political and cultural traditions and policy contexts of their country. Put another way, in relation to training for the principalship, it is unlikely that one size will fit all. On the basis of 64 detailed multi-perspective studies of successful principals in elementary and secondary schools in Australia, Canada, China, Denmark, England, Norway, Sweden, and the USA, the project concluded that, while all principals possessed the attributes, qualities, skills and broad moral and instrumental purposes described earlier in this paper, these were applied in five different combinations and with different emphasis at different times according to their own and their schools' phase of development and the demands of the broader policy and demographic contexts.

These combinations were:

1. Sustaining Passionate Commitment *and* Personal Accountability. High expectations; strong self-esteem; persistent; assertive; achievement oriented; learning centered: open communication; concern for educating the whole person based on clearly articulated values; rooted in the rights of students, inclusivity, social justice, and democratic principles.

2. Managing Tensions and Dilemmas *and* Maintaining Moral Purposes. Able to manage ambiguities and conflicts in ways that enhance individual and school improvement and that go beyond instrumental rationality.

3. Being Other-Centered *and* Learning Focused. Continuous improvement, individual and collective communication and capacity building, collaborative learning cultures; dispersing leadership, decision-making and responsibilities, encouraging trust; intervening strategically in ways which are relevant to personal and system contexts through community involvement, deprivatizing professional practice, and nurturing teacher leadership.

4. Making Emotional *and* Rational Investments. Emotional understanding; empathy; trust; being courageous; staying close to the action; interacting on both cognitive and emotional levels with key stakeholder groups; creating safe teaching and learning environments; being innovative.

5. Emphasizing The Personal *and* The Functional. Building person-centered communities which are functionally successful; modeling values; respecting others; exercising care with accountability.

Conclusion

Even with knowledge and experience—and an awareness of one's own and others' learning and development needs—it is still possible to have a relatively parochial perspective, to look primarily through the lens of one's own country, or if not one's own, then through the lens of so called developed countries, primarily USA, Europe, and Australia. In the busyness of one's own world, it is easy to forget that there are huge populations of children and young people being educated in South America, Africa, Asia and East Asia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East—continents and countries which have very different cultures and traditions of school leadership, of traditional "power distance" relationships (Hofstede, 1991), duty, and educational and social purposes. It has not been possible to draw upon all of these in the present, short discussion of what it means to be a successful principal in schools today. However, it is important to note that principals' leadership qualities are not the only important variables that can influence their abilities to achieve success in schools in different policy and socio-economic conditions and in different countries. Other important variables include educational opportunity; equity; parental support; student attendance; resource provision; and principal and teacher supply, retention, and qualifications.

Nevertheless, there are a number of features of successful principals' work which may, with justification, be said to cross most borders. While social policy, staffing, and student composition contexts affect the work of all principals, it seems that those who achieve and sustain success actively, skillfully, and sensitively manage and lead in ways which enable all staff in their schools to raise rather than dampen their aspirations of success for themselves and those in their care. They nurture cultures of care with achievement. They ensure that students leave their schools with a broader rather than narrower understanding of themselves and the world (as well as the country) in which they live, and achieve to the limits of their talents and beyond their initial expectations of themselves. In short, what being a successful principal *really* means is to have a passion for teaching and learning, for teachers and learners, which is articulated and communicated through the structures, cultures, relationships, and behaviors in the school; to ensure the continued possession by all staff of the knowledge, qualities, strategies, and skills necessary to foster self-belief, engagement, well-being, and achievement in all members of the community; and to have the courage to continue to reject minimalist approaches to teaching, learning, and leadership. To successful principals, just doing the job will never be enough.

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