

# Leadership for success in high poverty elementary schools

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## **Abstract**

*This article examines the practices of principals who have successfully improved student performance in challenging, high poverty elementary schools. The work begins with a brief overview of past research into school leadership in challenging contexts, followed by a description of the core practices Leithwood and Riehl (2005) argue are necessary, but insufficient, for student success in any context. These essential practices: setting direction, developing people and redesigning the organisation, provide a framework for understanding the work of leaders in successful high poverty schools. Next, case study findings from three, high poverty, elementary schools in the U.S. are reported. These findings are then compared briefly with findings from similar schools in Australia and England drawn from the International Successful Principals Project (ISSPP). In aggregate, the findings suggest that while differences in national policies and traditions may influence how the essential core practices are enacted, principals in challenging elementary schools used similar strategies to improve student performance, specifically, creating safe learning environments and engaging greater community involvement. Passion, persistence and commitment to improving the life chances of impoverished youngsters were traits common to all the successful principals studied. The article concludes with a few caveats related to the small size of this study's sample and then suggestions are offered for future research on successful leaders in high poverty schools.*

## **Introduction and overview**

In this article, I focus on a set of findings drawn in part from a multinational study of successful school leaders called the International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP), which examined the practices of principals who have successfully led school improvement initiatives. Specifically, I report on the work of principals who succeeded in challenging elementary schools in the U.S., and then draw comparisons to the practices of leaders in similar schools in Australia and England.

Over the past several decades, a growing body of research on the work of school principals has made it increasingly clear that leadership matters when it comes to improving student achievement (Fullan, 2001; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; Sergiovanni, 2001). For example, in a meta-analysis of studies on the effects of leadership on student achievement, Hallinger and Heck (1996) reported that school leaders account for almost 5% of the variation in test scores, or roughly 25% of all in-school variables, although others find that these effects may be stronger in the U.K. and U.S. than in countries such as the Netherlands (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2007; Witziers Bosker & Kruger, 2003).

A more recent review of the extant research by Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) concluded that among school-related factors over which policy makers have some control, effective leadership ranks second only to the quality of teaching in influencing student learning. Even more significant, in terms of the focus of this article, is Scheerens and Bosker's (1997) finding that quality leadership is particularly important in schools serving youngsters living in poverty.

In order to achieve successful outcomes in the face of high levels of student poverty, school leaders must often confront significant challenges, such as poor nutrition, inadequate health services, high rates of illiteracy, and criminal activities that include drug and substance abuse. In turn, teachers in such schools often deal with high rates of student transience, absence and indiscipline. Maintaining productive levels of instructional continuity when youngsters are frequently moving in and out of school and disrupting classes is a major challenge at such sites. In other words, the external realities of a child's life create significant obstacles to his or her performing successfully relative to public expectations for school outcomes. Nevertheless, legislative mandates in the U.S., as well as in Australia and England, now hold schools directly accountable for student performance, even in the face of such daunting challenges.

The 2002 *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) federal legislation in the U.S., for example, was specifically intended to address the needs of children in schools that are consistently performing below expectations, and it holds ALL schools accountable for the success of ALL children. While, NCLB has been the target of withering criticism that has attacked, among other things, the high-stakes standardised testing regimes used to evaluate annual student progress as well as the lack of sufficient funding necessary to provide teachers with on-going professional development, the fundamental underpinnings of the legislation, that is, to make sure that every American child, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity or wealth, be given the chance to succeed, was supported by both sides of the political aisle. But, as Rebell and Wolffe (2008: 26) point out:

The cruel irony of the American education system is that low-income and minority children who come to school with the greatest educational deficits generally have the fewest resources and least expertise devoted to their needs - and therefore the least opportunity to improve their futures.

Interestingly, as far back as the Effective Schools Literature of the 1970s and 1980s, and as recently as Smith's 2008 book, *Schools That Change*, there is evidence of principals working in high-poverty schools that have defied the odds; schools that produced levels of student achievement that were markedly better than would have been predicted given the demographic characteristics of the student body. These schools are statistical outliers when compared to the performance of others facing similarly impoverished conditions (see for example Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979; Purkey & Smith, 1983; or Smith, 2008). Making this interest in quality leadership even more compelling is the fact that there is a growing concern that educational leadership is in relatively short supply in the U.S. and many other parts of the world, especially for the type of challenging, high poverty schools being examined (Jacobson, 2005).

After a quick overview of key conceptions of school leadership and core practices essential for student success, I report on the work of three principals who have successfully led high poverty elementary schools in the U.S., using a few illustrative examples drawn from interviews conducted at each study site with teachers, support staff, parents and the principals themselves. I then draw comparisons with the practices of leaders in challenging schools in Australia and England, building on a recent article by Ylimaki, Jacobson and Drysdale (2007).

My interest in the academic performance of children in high poverty schools is very personal and of long-standing. My teaching career began in just such a school in New York City in 1970. I did not have the good fortune to work with a principal as competent as any of those reported in this article. My introduction to the classroom was essentially a 'sink or swim' proposition and though I managed to remain afloat, I remember feeling under-prepared and overwhelmed by the task at hand, as well as isolated from any guidance or support from either colleagues or supervisors. Upon

reflection, I believe this sense of inadequacy contributed to my eventually leaving the classroom and entering academe, where I had the time and resources to examine the challenges confronting educators in high poverty schools free from the daily pressures that such work entails. To this end, I have been working with a group of colleagues from the University at Buffalo's (UB) Graduate School of Education (Corrie Giles, Lauri Johnson and Rose Ylimaki) to determine what successful principals in high poverty schools in western New York have done to improve the academic performance of children in their charge. With funding support from the Wallace Foundation and then the New York State Education Finance Research Consortium, we have so far conducted seven in-depth case studies of high poverty schools wherein student performance improved subsequent to the arrival of the principal being studied. The first three case studies we undertook were of the high poverty, inner city elementary schools that form the basis of this article (see Giles et al. 2005 for greater detail about Fraser, one of the three schools, or Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson, Ylimaki 2005 & 2007 for greater detail about all three cases. For the purpose of confidentiality, schools are identified using pseudonyms rather than their real names).

Concurrent to the start of our work in New York, the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) was initiated in 2001 at a meeting organised by Professor Christopher Day at the University of Nottingham. The ISSPP is an on-going study by teams of researchers from around the world (currently Australia, Canada, China, Denmark, England, Norway, Sweden and the U.S., with Cyprus, Israel, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa and Turkey soon to join) who are building a database of case studies that examine what successful principals do across diverse national contexts. Amongst the teams in the ISSPP, the team from UB was the only one to look specifically at high poverty schools. To date, the ISSPP has produced over 65 case studies of successful schools, with 13 (20%) being high poverty elementary schools in Australia, England and the U.S. (Leithwood & Day, 2007). Findings from the schools in these three nations provide the comparative perspectives for this article, but unfortunately, with such a limited number of study sites, this report is primarily descriptive and caution is recommended about making generalisations.

### **Evolving conceptions of leadership**

Studies of effective leadership in high poverty urban elementary schools have been conducted in the U.S. since the late 1970s (for example Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979; Purkey & Smith, 1983). These examinations were undertaken in response to the 1966 Coleman Report on *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Coleman, 1966), which found that variation in student performance was accounted for more by out of school factors such as family background, socio-economic status and race, than in-school resources such as expenditures and facilities (Mosteller & Moynihan, 1972). Yet surprisingly, when student achievement was plotted against socio-economic status there emerged small clusters of statistical 'outliers', that is, schools serving very low socio-economic populations, yet achieving high levels of student performance. Moreover, these schools tended to be inner city elementary schools that were serving an almost entirely African-American student body (Rosenholtz, 1985). These statistical outliers became the focus of the Effective Schools Research, and the principals who led these schools overcame the odds by working tenaciously to: 1) create safe and orderly learning environments; 2) set clear instructional objectives; 3) demand high performance expectations from teachers and students with a specific focus on increased student time on task; and 4) develop positive home-school relations (Jacobson & Bezzina, 2008).

Duke's (1987) analysis of effective schools literature contrasted it with earlier (pre-Coleman) conceptions of leadership that focused almost exclusively on the skills that had to be acquired in order for leaders to do their job well. Duke argued that leadership skills in the absence of measurable student outcomes ring hollow if the primary goal is simply to maintain organisational control and/or employer satisfaction. Thus, both process and outcomes become central to understanding the work of principals and head teachers.

Harris' (2002) study of successful leaders in challenging schools revealed leadership practices that aligned with the effective schools findings. Moreover, Harris found that some head teachers resorted to authoritarian leadership styles when confronting serious problems. Studies in Victoria (Australia) add to this perception of successful leadership that is directive and purposeful during early stages of school improvement (Caldwell, 1998). However, while authoritarian leadership may have an initial impact, it appears that more democratic 'distributed' approaches are ultimately necessary for sustained improvement (Mulford & Silins, 2003).

These findings represent an important transition in our thinking about educational leadership. Traditional notions of the charismatic and heroic underpinnings of leadership, which are deeply rooted in an individualistic and non-systemic worldview (Senge, 1990), have gradually given way to conceptions of leadership associated with empowerment, transformation and community. In other words, leadership is no longer viewed as just the function of a titular or officially designated head, but rather as the result of collective and coordinated learning distributed among members of the teaching and support staff (see for example Gronn & Hamilton, 2004; Riley & MacBeath, 1998; Spillane, Camburn & Pareja, 2007). That being said, it is still the principal who is most often expected to put the practices in place that will enable these more systemic approaches to emerge.

### **Core practices for success**

Leithwood and Riehl (2005) have further distilled the empirical research on school leadership and consequently identified three core practices they claim are necessary though insufficient for student success, even in the most challenging contexts. These core practices are: 1) Setting directions - by identifying and articulating a vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals and creating high performance expectations for students and adults; 2) Developing people - by offering intellectual stimulation, providing individualised support and serving as an appropriate role model; and finally, 3) Redesigning the organisation - by strengthening school cultures, modifying organisational structures and building collaborative processes.

Although not rigidly sequential, these practices suggest a logical progression in which values and ideas are translated into actions. Specifically, if they are to increase the likelihood of student success, leaders need to create a sense of coordinated purpose within the school, then provide the resources and appropriate motivation to enable the staff to develop the skills necessary for the collective undertaking. Finally, they have to remove existing organisational obstacles to the creation of these collaborative cultures and structures. To get a better sense of the practical application of these core practices, I next report on the work of principals in three high poverty, inner city, elementary schools in the U.S. But first, I provide a quick overview of the methodology utilised by the ISSPP teams in conducting these case studies.

### **Research methodology**

The ISSPP teams used purposive sampling and common criteria in case study selection (see Jacobson & Day (2007) for greater detail about the ISSPP research protocols, case studies and contexts). As it evolved, the guiding framework and methodology for the ISSPP drew from several sources including - leading schools in times of change (Day, Harris & Hadfield 2001); successful school

leadership (Gurr, Drysdale, DiNatale, Ford, Hardy & Swann, 2003); leadership for school–community partnerships (Kilpatrick, Johns, Mulford, Falk & Prescott, 2002); leadership for organisational learning and improved student outcomes (Mulford, Silins & Leithwood, 2004); and the previously mentioned review of the literature on successful school leadership by Leithwood & Riehl (2005).

Schools were chosen based on student performance on standardised tests that exceeded expectations after a principal's arrival. For the schools in New York, this data are readily available from the annual reports cards the State Education Department (SED) generates for public use. SED also awards schools recognised to be amongst the most improved on any or all of four standardised tests: 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade math and English/Language Arts (ELA) scores the State uses to determine annual school progress. By using these reports cards and accolades, our selection of schools for the study were, in essence, State sanctioned. In addition, SED uses the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch as its proxy for levels of school poverty. To this measure of poverty, SED adds the percentage of students in a school with limited English proficiency and then divides this numerator by the financial resources available to the school in order to determine its Need to Resource Capacity index (N/RC). The schools selected for our study were those identified by the State as being High Need, that is, those schools whose index is in the highest quartile. In other words, when compared to all other schools in New York State, the schools selected for this study were in the top 25% in terms of how great their needs are relative to the resources available to them (see Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson & Ylimaki, (2005) for greater detail about the research protocols, survey instruments and the standardised test scores for the three schools).

Conceptually, our analysis of leadership in these high need schools rests upon an a priori and largely circumstantial argument that if student performance improved subsequent to the beginning of a principal's tenure, then s/he may have had something to do with it. Using semi-structured interviews, we first asked the principals themselves about their self-perceived role in a school's success, specifically, how they defined success and what they felt they had done to contribute to it. We then queried teachers, support staff, parents, and students to see if they felt the principal had played a key role in their school's success and what was it that they perceived the principal had done to make it happen. For each site, we used these collective responses as well as official school and State documents and our field notes to triangulate our findings, that is, to determine through these multi-perspectives what had transpired that ultimately resulted in improved student achievement.

Our colleagues in Australia, Gurr, Drysdale and Mulford (2005) and England, Day (2005) used similar selection and interview protocols. The ISSPP data analyses began within each country and then across countries using Leithwood and Riehl's (2005) theoretical constructs to guide the discussion. (The complete country reports and analyses for all ISSPP national teams can be found in both a 2005 special issue of the *Journal of Educational Administration* co-edited by Jacobson, Day and Leithwood, and in *Successful Principal Leadership in Times of Change: An International Perspective* (2007), co-edited by Day & Leithwood). The cases reported in this article are a subset of the larger ISSPP study, including only those schools that are both elementary and high poverty.

### **Background data about the three US schools**

Table 1 reports 2003 data for the three U.S. elementary schools and their respective principals. Several issues need to be considered when examining the school demographics. For example, Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) suggest that children struggling academically can benefit from being in small schools, recommending an optimum enrollment of 250-300 students in an elementary school. Note, however, that the number of students enrolled in Fraser and Costello are twice and thrice those recommended figures respectively. With regard to measures of poverty,

which is the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch – one can readily see the level of economic need in these school communities as the range of students living in poverty runs from 3 out of 4 in Costello to 9 out of 10 in Fraser. Finally, note that two of the three case sites, Hamilton and Fraser, have relatively homogeneous student bodies (94% and 98% African-American respectively), while Costello is considerably more diverse (53% African-American, 33% Caucasian and 14% a combination of Hispanic-, Asian- and Native-American). This factor, greater racial and ethnic heterogeneity, may be a significant impediment to success because the inner city elementary schools studied the Effective Schools Research tended to be racially homogeneous (Rosenholtz, 1985).

When taken together, these differences in school size and racial and ethnic diversity may impede a principal's ability to communicate effectively with the school community. All things being equal, the larger a school, the less opportunity for contacts a principal can have with individual students, teachers or parents. Furthermore, greater racial and ethnic diversity could increase the potential for miscommunications due to differences in cultural cues. Though the analyses used in this study were unable to parse out how variations in school size and diversity affect successful leadership, these factors may be relevant and ought to be central to future examinations in this area. Also, the fact that the three successful principals studied were African-American women working in predominantly African-American communities is probably more than just mere coincidence. Unfortunately, the extent to which gender, race or both influenced a principal's practices and performance could not be determined by the methods employed. But because these factors seem so relevant, team members have begun grappling with these issues in subsequent analyses (see for example Johnson's (2007) work on culturally responsive practices in Ylimaki & Jacobson (2007))

Table 1: *School Summaries – (Pseudonyms are used for school names)*

School (Grade Levels) Community type		Costello (PK-6) Urban	Hamilton (PK-8) Urban	Fraser (K-8) Urban
Students	Enrollment	857	397	519
	Need	High	High	High
	(%) Free Lunch	74	82	90
	Per Pupil Exp.	\$12,800	\$12,200	\$12,200+
	Race/Ethnicity (%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
	Caucasian	33	2	1
	African-	53	94	98
	Hispanic-	5	3	1
	Native- Asian-	3 6	1 0	0 0
Principals	Gender	Female	Female	Female
	Ethnicity	African-Am.	African-Am.	African-Am.
	Yrs. Educator	35	14	38
	Yrs. Principal	12	4	28
	Yrs. at School	8	4	10
	Education	Masters	Masters	Doctorate

Data sources: For schools and students - New York State Education Department 2002-2003 State Report Cards. For principals - Principal Interviews and official school documents

## **Enacting the core practices**

### *Setting direction:*

At each of these schools, the principal's planned direction was made explicit to all involved in the enterprise, that is, the needs of children were paramount and that everyone had to work together to improve the life chances of their students. By word and deed, these three women made it obvious that all school decisions and practices would have to pass the litmus test of whether they were good for students and improved their learning. In each case, the principal's strategy began with improvements to the physical environment, such as painting walls, acquiring new furniture and display boards and, in one case, refurbishing the staff room. But it was a concern for personal safety and the creation of a nurturing environment that really set the table for improved performance. This strategy had both a symbolic and practical purpose because it demonstrated that the school was changing and because it allowed students and teachers to feel safe as they interacted. To accomplish this, principals limited access to the school by screening visitors and minimising disruptions to instruction. These security initiatives were coupled with efforts to make the school more inviting to parents. So even as a building's exterior doors were being locked, the school was actually becoming more open than in the past, with the single caveat being that your purpose in coming to the school was in the interest of children. The Fraser principal's strategic objectives come through clearly in this response:

I knew the first thing I had to do was clean the school up...literally, get the graffiti off the walls and clean the bathrooms, lock the doors so people couldn't wander in and use the bathroom. So we locked all doors but one and got parents to help us secure that one. And it meant cleaning up the neighbourhood around the school. Parents and the community and teachers needed to see the school as a safe place where children could and would learn.

The principals were all cognisant of the barriers to learning and academic achievement that poverty can produce, but none would allow these conditions to be used to lower expectations. They convinced their staffs that while poverty is the current reality of their children's lives, it is not the final determinant of their futures. This was a message that all three instilled in their students and faculty, and those teachers who could not or would not buy into these heightened expectations were encouraged to leave. The following teacher comments indicate how the school's new direction had influenced them:

The expectation that every student here can learn and every student will learn no matter what, that is what's made a tremendous difference. Before it wasn't like that, it wasn't always like that here. It changed because the people in leadership changed (Teacher at Costello).

Our principal is very clear in what she expects and that makes her a good leader. Right down from our lesson plans to what she expects of you in our classroom, we know our expectations. There's no second-guessing what

you're supposed to be doing or what you should do. And if you're not meeting expectations, then help is there (Teacher at Hamilton).

## **Developing people**

All three principals understood that if people were expected to improve their performance, they needed opportunities to build the intellectual and practical skill sets necessary to succeed. Using whatever fiscal or material resources they had available, these principals worked diligently to

provide professional development and individual and collective support for their staff:

I started to look for professional development for teachers because the reality was; they were doing the best they could do, but it wasn't really bringing about the results that we needed. I believed these children could do more. When I started it was all teacher-directed; it was all pen and pencil. Today, if you went into a classroom, you'd see kids working in cooperative groups. You'd see the teacher moving around the room, working with a small group, while the other kids may be working independently (Principal at Hamilton).

Teachers recognised and appreciated the support and professional autonomy they were receiving:

We're very supported by the principal. We're able to go to her with questions and ask for resources. As for professional development, if we have questions and there's a resource out there and we think we can find the answer, we're allowed to pursue that. There's autonomy. I feel very supported because I do a lot of teacher training in the computer lab. The principal is very supportive of us doing new things (Teacher at Fraser).

When the resources were not there to provide the needed support, these principals often took it upon themselves to model best instructional practices. For example, the principal at Hamilton began teaching an eighth grade math class, which is noteworthy in the U.S., because American principals rarely engage in direct classroom instruction. Not only did she model the type of professional behaviour she expected of her teachers, she actually turned around a failing class of students. This was not something lost on her staff, as one of her teachers noted:

You can't ask people to do things you're not willing to do yourself. When there was no one to teach a struggling eighth grade class, she did it herself. And the students made gains that year. I think leading by example has made all the difference.

### *Redesigning the organisation*

Once their schools' key safety concerns were addressed, principals began working with teachers, support staff and parents to consider ways to create structures that would enable success or remove obstacles to it. Of the three schools, Fraser had accomplished the most in terms of redesigning the organisation primarily through the use of a site-based decision-making team. This team distributed key responsibilities to five site-based management committees: curriculum, discipline, parent involvement, morale and beautification. All five committees had parent representation and, in order to better coordinate their efforts, all five committees send a representative to the school decision-making team. The principal was especially intent on engaging parents as active participants in school improvement initiatives because she recognised that prior to her arrival many of these same folks felt disenfranchised from their children's education, viewing the school with suspicion and distrust. To counteract these perceptions, she went out of her way to reach out to parents and make herself readily accessible to them. For parents and community members, having a principal who never seemed to be too busy to listen to their concerns helped to build trust and made them feel that they were valued. They finally had someone who would champion their needs and give them a voice in school decision-making:

She has parent involvement committees within our building. She's established a Parent Patrol, where parents are outside our building in the morning and after school, making sure that the children are safe on the playground and off the schoolyard. We have parent involvement in the building where parents will work during the day as

volunteers just to sit at the desk by the front door and, as people come in, have them sign in, whatever (Parent at Fraser).

This principal knew that if her school had a solid link to the local community it was more likely to be supported in difficult times. Therefore, in addition to organising social, sporting and charitable events for parents, her committees also began evening classes and community meetings.

While the principals at Costello and Hamilton had both started to redesign their schools around similar types of site-based decision-making teams, our evidence suggested they still had considerable work to do in order to reach Fraser's stage of development, especially in terms of school-community relations.

### **Common themes**

When looking across the cases, all three principals set and maintained a clear purpose and direction for their schools and exerted a very strong, positive influence on people's willingness to follow their lead. All three exhibited the core skills that Leithwood and Riehl (2005) contend are necessary for school success. At each site, the school's central mission, that the needs of children were paramount, was explicit. This was not a mere rhetorical flourish but rather a deeply held belief that became increasingly apparent over time. The principals' first step was to make sure that students, parent and teachers felt safe, cared for and provided a secure, nurturing environment. In each case, the principal secured the building by limiting access and screening visitors, but simultaneously made the school more inviting to students and their parents.

Creating safe, inviting environments required principals to become a visible presence, especially during arrival and dismissal, when they could greet students, parents and other community members. The principals also made their presence felt in hallways, classrooms, auditoriums, lunchrooms and gyms, signalling to teachers, support staff and, most importantly, students, that they were aware of what was going on in the school and making sure that everyone was performing at the high levels expected of them. Their presence was intended to reassure, not to intimidate or coerce. They wanted to reassure teachers that student indiscipline would not be tolerated and reassure students that they would be treated with respect and kindness. This visibility created a two-way visual dialogue in which they were simultaneously watching and being watched. They were scrutinised as to how they handled themselves in various circumstances, and in every case they modelled commitment to the core beliefs they were trying to instill. The principal's commitment became the school's commitment, her expectations became their expectations, and her mission became theirs as well.

All three principals understood that creating the right environment was only the first step in improving student performance. They understood that children and adults have to believe that the goals being set for them are attainable and that they will be provided the resources and development needed to achieve them. None would allow the conditions of high poverty to be used as an excuse for poor performance, but they knew that if teachers and students were going to improve their performance, they needed opportunities to build their intellectual and experiential capacity.

In order to promote professional development and provide individualised and collective support for their staff, the principals used whatever fiscal and material resources they had available. They role modelled best instructional practices and, where ever possible, redesigned organisational structures to facilitate higher levels of performance. Central to these organisational changes was the desire to strengthen school cultures and build collaborative processes, often through the creation of common planning times. Occasionally changes were met with resistance and a principal's commitment and persistence tested. Tough decisions sometimes had to be made and, more than

once, teachers were 'encouraged' to transfer to other schools. Although these were not pleasant experiences for the individuals involved, when the principal felt that a teacher was not working productively in service to the school's mission, she did not hesitate to replace them, but only after all attempts at professional development had been exhausted.

### **Comparative perspectives**

From the challenging elementary school case studies conducted in England (Day, 2005 and 2007) and Australia (Gurr, Drysdale & Mulford, 2005; Gurr & Drysdale, 2007 and Mulford; 2007), British and Australian principals also made safety a major priority early in their tenure. Similar to their American counterparts, successful principals in these countries were often depicted as being authoritarian initially, but more democratic after a safer environment had been assured. Yet in all three countries, respondents recognised and respected the principal's passion for helping children feel safe and successful, and understood that these actions were being undertaken in service to instructional improvement.

Across contexts, the principals' next efforts were typically directed towards redesigning their schools to increase professional collaboration and dialogue, and improving home-school relationships. Similar to their American counterparts, Australian principals and English head teachers also saw the importance of developing teachers' instructional capacities, as well as their professional commitment. The interview narratives in all three countries indicate a commitment on the part of principals to help their staff, whether it was providing time to deal with a family crisis, joining in alongside teachers in doing the hard work or simply showing empathy and respect to all the people they worked with and for. The cases also suggest that these principals and head teachers were successful because they either used their own expert pedagogical knowledge and skills to develop teachers or did whatever they could to acquire externally developed training programs that could provide the same benefit.

Moreover, mandated accountability policies, which have been in place in England and Australia for at least a decade prior to the NCLB in the U.S., have influenced the actions of these school leaders in two telling ways. The first was to shield their teachers, as much as possible, from some of the needless pressure of accountability, while the other was to simultaneously use that same pressure to focus professional conversation around the fact that mandatory testing can help teachers better understand how children learn, how they themselves teach and how both can be improved. As Day (2005) pointed out, the successful English head teachers he studied actively mediated strict accountability and school improvement policies, as well as narrowly conceived instructional improvement agendas, while principals in the Australian cases saw themselves as 'curriculum leaders' who acted as role models for research-based teaching and learning (Gurr, Drysdale & Mulford, 2005). Giles et al. (2007) describe this as the 'accountability principle' wherein successful principals used the external pressure caused by public scrutiny to leverage the internal changes they were already working towards (see also Jacobson, Johnson, Giles & Ylimaki, 2005).

In the main, the core practices of successful principals in challenging contexts across these three countries were quite similar, but some differences in their enactment did emerge. For example, direction setting in the U.S. was more explicitly linked to state and local accountability demands that are assessed annually. Therefore, principals tended to take a relatively shorter-term perspective on school goals related to mastery of literacy and numeracy than their Australian counterparts who focused more on learning over a lifetime. This difference in perspective may be due to the fact that Australian literacy policies appear to be more closely aligned with authentic pedagogy than in the U.S.

In terms of redesigning schools, there were nuanced differences in the approaches principals took, with successful English head teachers fostering cultures of collaboration through teamwork, Australian principals relying more on the development of distributed governance, and Americans trying to de-privatise teaching practice. Given the limited number of cases considered (13 across three countries), there is really no way to know at this time whether these differences actually represent contextual differences, simple happenstance or perhaps the conceptual orientation of the researchers involved. Regardless, these analyses are worthy of further investigation.

### **Conclusions, caveats and directions for future research**

The successful principals of high poverty elementary schools we studied in Australia, England and the U.S. had two major challenges in common: 1) all were experiencing increased public accountability and higher expectations for student performance; and, 2) all had to deal with these increasing pressures while confronting the daunting problems associated with their students' dire economic circumstances. Yet, in spite of these pressures and challenges, the principals studied proved to be successful because they set and maintained a direction for their schools that focused explicitly on the needs of their students and then they exerted a very strong, positive influence on people's willingness to follow. All exhibited the core skills that Leithwood and Riehl (2005) contend are necessary for school success, with some minor variations due to differences in national context. In addition, the principals we studied were all passionate in their desire to make a difference in the lives of children. In many cases, they had knowingly assumed the leadership of a school in a poverty stricken area with high needs and few resources. In so doing, they brought with them a genuine concern for the socially equitable and just education of the children and communities they served. Their enthusiasm was accompanied by persistence and optimism, and in these high accountability contexts, they leveraged external demands to overcome resistance, particularly among teachers who questioned the academic abilities of students living in poverty. While these principals recognised and had empathy for the barriers to learning that poverty can produce, none would allow those conditions to be used as an excuse for low expectations or poor performance. Instead, they truly believed in the ability of all students, so they focused on improving the learning environment; applied pressure early in the process to encourage adherence and then used whatever resources they could generate to engage teachers in professional dialogue and development. They also worked hard to involve parents and other community members in school activities and decision-making. Reconnecting the school to its community was absolutely central to their school improvement efforts.

Passion, persistence and commitment were traits common to these principals as they struggled to improve the life chances of the impoverished youngsters in their charge. I think it is fair to say our cases clearly demonstrate that, regardless of national context, leading a high poverty school is not for the faint of heart. It takes courage and persistence, as well as leadership knowledge and skills, to be successful in these challenging environments. But while these findings lend support to the contention that there exists a set of core leadership practices necessary for success in high poverty contexts, one needs to be very cautious about making generalisations from this rather limited number of cases. Attempts to identify 'what works' make little sense unless such research includes rich descriptions of where it has worked, especially in terms of cultural expectations and national and local policies and practices. This project represents an initial attempt at such a cross-national analysis, but it has its limitations. For example, the schools examined in this study were located in Western, primarily English-speaking contexts. Expanding both the number and type of national contexts studied (for example, schools in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East), should make our findings more robust and help to fill existing gaps in what we know about how school

leadership effects student achievement in high poverty schools.

The current study further suggests that future research needs to tease out the individual and combined influences of key demographic and personal characteristics such as school size and diversity, and the principal's gender and/or ethnicity, to name just a few. Moreover, given that the findings reported address only elementary schools, middle and secondary schools also need to be studied. Finally, leadership for student success in high poverty schools is a dynamic, ongoing process, which suggests the need for longitudinal studies to determine how such success can be sustained. The studies reported herein were relatively short term in duration, perhaps a year or two at most. They represent snapshots of a particular period in a school's life when it achieved some measure of success, so up to this time the issue of sustainability has gone unexamined in the ISSPP study. Clearly, this is a topic requiring more attention, especially as we come to understand that school improvement cannot be dependent upon any one person. Concerns about sustainability beg some of the following questions: Over time, how does a school continue to improve? What happens to a school after a successful leader leaves? Can an effective leader bring his or her template for success to subsequent schools? Fortunately, sustainability has been identified as a critical focus of the next phase of ISSPP, and the U.S. team has already begun collecting data at Fraser, five years after our first visit. Of the three American schools reported in this article, Fraser's principal is the only one still in post.

Finally, while appreciating the need to link leadership practices to student academic outcomes given the pressures of current accountability mandates, there is a need to further explore whether and how school leadership affects the affective outcomes of students, especially for students with special needs and those in challenging schools. In other words, future research in this area needs to expand the operational definition of school success.

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