

Understanding successful principal leadership: progress on a broken front

The Authors

Kenneth Leithwood, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

Purpose – To synthesize the results of the seven country reports covered in the special issue of *JEA* on successful school principalship.

Design/methodology/approach – Presents the main themes of the articles with their main implications and benefits. Examines the different models.

Findings – The country reports provide encouraging signs of progress in addressing this limitation. Such progress seems primarily due to the development of multiple cases, over time, within each country. This allows for ongoing refinement of ideas and data collection techniques, eventually resulting in the cross-case reports appearing in this issue. These reports provide some indication, as well, that researchers are beginning to learn from their colleagues in other countries.

Originality/value – Summarizes multiple case studies of successful principal leadership in seven countries.

Article Type: General review

Keyword(s): Education; Leaders; Leadership; Schools; Teachers.

Journal: Journal of Educational Administration

Volume: 43

Number: 6

Year: 2005

pp: 619-629

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ISSN: 0957-8234

Introduction

This issue of the *Journal of Educational Administration (JEA)* summarizes multiple case studies of successful principal leadership in seven countries. A total of 63 cases of such leadership have been analyzed in the country reports and critical information is provided about the contexts in which principals exercised their leadership. By qualitative research standards, 63 cases is remarkably large, perhaps even an unprecedented number of educational leadership cases conducted from a common perspective and using largely similar data collection techniques.

One important motivation for those of us involved in the international project-giving rise to the country reports was to “have our cake and eat it too”. We wanted, for example, to approximate both the standards of internal validity commonly associated with intensive qualitative research and the standards of external validity typically reserved for large-scale quantitative research. Although not reflected in this set of papers, our project is now undertaking a set of quantitative studies in order to enjoy the advantages of multi-methods research.

Bryman and his colleagues have explored the strengths and limitations of qualitative methods for studying leadership in two papers published seven years apart. The first of these analyses ([Bryman et al., 1996](#)) largely argued for the potential of qualitative research to reveal how leadership may be hindered or helped (“moderated”) by circumstances confronting the leader, as well as outlining in detail the “antecedents” or influences on the nature of leaders' work of organizational type or sector. [Bryman's \(2004\)](#) most recent analysis, based on a review of more than 70 qualitative leadership studies, unpacked the actual contributions of such research, in comparison with a substantial number of quantitative studies.

Among the unique contributions of qualitative studies were: greater sensitivity to variations in both organizational context and leadership styles; often a longitudinal perspective on leadership; and a greater focus on the role of leadership in bringing about organizational change. Most of the cases reported in this issue illustrate these contributions, although a longitudinal perspective is not evident in all cases. This is the good news.

The bad news, according to [Bryman's \(2004\)](#) analysis, is that compared with quantitative leadership research, qualitative research tended to be less cumulative, less likely to acknowledge and build on previous evidence, and have weaker external validity. A recent analysis of qualitative school leadership studies reported in key UK journals arrived at much the same conclusion ([Leithwood and Levin, 2005](#)). To Bryman's list of limitations, this recent analysis would add that such research typically provides only weak evidence, at best, of leadership effects on organizational outcomes and is usually unable to detect the effects of variation in the status of key variables.

I pursue two goals in this paper. First, I synthesize the results of the seven country reports included in this issue of the journal. Second, I consider how qualitative research pursued on a large scale addresses the strengths and limitations typical of qualitative research; “typical” strengths and limitations are associated with qualitative studies conducted individually and on a small scale. We have little knowledge of what is possible with qualitative research pursued on a large scale.

Four questions basic to an understanding of successful leadership serve as a framework for synthesizing the results of the country reports, my first goal.

1. What practices are used by successful principals and do these practices vary across contexts?
2. What gives rise to successful principal leadership?
3. Under what conditions are the effects of such practices heightened or diminished?
4. Which variables effectively “link” principals' influence to student learning?

Successful leadership practices across contexts

Successful principal leadership practices identified in the seven country reports are described in this section using a classification system developed from a review of school leadership research by [Leithwood and Riehl \(2005\)](#). Used more or less explicitly in the US, Australian and English reports, as well, this classification system identifies nine specific practices aimed at setting directions, developing people and redesigning the organization as “the basics” of successful leadership – probably not sufficient for success, but necessary in almost all contexts.

While much earlier leadership research associates these practices with individuals, recent interest in distributed forms of leadership suggests that such practices might well be shared or distributed across individuals or performed by teams. The Danish and Norwegian cases, for example, represent this perspective very well.

Setting directions. Evidence reviewed by [Leithwood and Riehl \(2005\)](#) suggested that successful leadership creates a compelling sense of purpose in the organizations by developing a shared vision of the future, helping build consensus about relevant short-term goals and demonstrating high expectations for colleagues' work.

The country reports describe successful leaders using these practices, but in ways specifically suited to their contexts, for example, in the US report, direction-setting was closely linked to demands for greater accountability and in Australia, shared visions focused on learning over the life span. One of the two Chinese principals used exceptional volleyball and choir performance as short-term goals contributing to the longer-term vision of a school considered excellent for many things, including its academic programs. Students' learning was central to the direction – setting activities of all successful leaders in all countries. Democratic values also were infused throughout discussions about school directions in Norway, Denmark and Sweden.

Developing people. [Leithwood and Riehl \(2005\)](#) include, among the practices in this category, providing support for individual colleagues' ideas and initiatives, providing intellectual stimulation (e.g. reflect on existing practices, question taken-for-granted assumptions and consider new practices) and modeling important values and practices (“walk the talk”).

The country reports provide many examples of successful principals engaged in such practices. Australian principals, for example, were reported to support staff in times of crisis, acknowledge good work, and engage staff in critical reflection. Norwegian leaders fostered the productive debate inferred by a “sparring partners” metaphor. US leaders were reported to mentor their colleagues, as well as model the values and instructional practices considered productive for their schools.

Most successful leaders were reported to be visible and accessible to staff, students and parents, so were readily available to provide assistance as needed, a feature highlighted particularly in the reports from Sweden and Denmark.

Redesigning the organization. [Leithwood and Riehl \(2005\)](#) include in this category of successful practices, building a collaborative school culture, creating structures to encourage participation in decision-making, and building productive relationships with parents and the wider community. Successful principals in most country reports encouraged cultures of collaboration by distributing leadership (most countries, but given particular emphasis in the Norwegian cases), developing broad-based governance structures (Australia) and de-privatizing teaching practice (US). Leadership in the Northern European cases began with participation as a traditional value rather than something that needed to be developed.

The two Chinese cases do illustrate the range of meanings associated with the concepts of collaboration and leadership distribution, however. [Hofstede \(1980\)](#) has classified the Chinese national culture as “high power distance”. In such cultures, people demonstrate greater respect for hierarchy, position, age and formal authority than do those in low power distance cultures. Not surprisingly, then, although the Chinese principals involved their staffs in decision-making, these were more often decisions about how than what.

In sum, the seven country reports do not challenge conclusions from earlier research about the value of a common set of “basic” leadership practices for principals in almost all national contexts and the policy environments that they share. However, the reports do increase our sensitivity to how the enactments of these generally successful practices are adapted by principals to contexts in order to have their predicted effects. From these data, it is reasonable to conclude that successful principal leadership practices are common across contexts in their general form but highly adaptable and contingent in their specific enactment. As [Ray et al. \(2004\)](#) explain, leadership is a “reflexively automatic” activity and such activity is never innocent of context. Rather, context:

... provides the subtle, implicit, tacitly interpreted cues for enacting everyday actions ... The active process of “doing things” in practice is always shaped by the reflexively automatic use of “here and now” tacit knowledge that is deployed locally, *in situ*, by the actors themselves ([Ray et al., 2004, p. 332](#)).

Factors giving rise to successful school leadership

Factors stimulating successful leadership practices could include, for example, on-the-job learning, professional development experiences, socialization processes and individual traits. These are factors both internal to leaders, as well as features of their external environments. The seven country reports identified both types of factors. They also identified potential factors of both types, factors about which the country reports provided information but did not explicitly examine their influence on leadership.

Internal factors. From the seven country reports, taken together, we learn that successful leaders brought to their work key dispositions, skills and cognitive styles. Dispositions common to many of these leaders included a tremendous passion and enthusiasm for the education of children. This enthusiasm or passion was typically harnessed to an ethic of care, a set of values about social justice and the equitable education of all students. Their high need to achieve the goals established for their schools and their considerable persistence and optimism in pursuit of those goals seems to be a substantial part of the explanation for their success. Many of these successful leaders also demonstrated a high degree of emotional sensitivity to the needs and aspirations of their colleagues, as well as the parents and students served by their schools.

Successful principal leaders were described in at least five of the country reports to be skilled communicators. They also demonstrated considerable cognitively flexibility which was evident in their willingness to listen carefully to the ideas of others, in their open-mindedness, and in the creativity and lateral thinking which they applied to their problem solving.

Principals' age, gender, years of experience and education were potential internal antecedents in most of the country reports. Evidence from other research, however, does suggest that leaders' age, gender and education may influence their behaviors¹.

Forcefully drawing attention to the importance of leaders' dispositions in accounting for the nature of their practices is an important contribution of the country reports. School leadership research has yet to devote much energy to the study of leaders' internal lives, with the exception of their values ([Begley and Johansson, 2003](#)), and cognitive processes ([Leithwood and Steinbach, 1995](#)). But evidence gathered in non-school contexts suggests the need to remediate this oversight and points to the importance of leaders' motivations, self efficacy beliefs, capacities and such personality

characteristics such as optimism and openness ([Popper and Mayseless, 2002](#)); this evidence also points to the value of greater attention to leaders' emotional sensitivity ([Wong and Law, 2002](#)). As [Antonakis and House \(2002\)](#) argue, in sum, there is a "...compelling case for incorporating dispositional arguments and evidence into theories of behavior in organizations" (2002, p. 23).

External factors. All seven of the country reports indicated that successful principals worked in state or national policy contexts preoccupied with holding schools more publicly accountable. This preoccupation was in its relatively early stages in the three northern European countries but in very mature stages in Australia, England and the US. Perhaps not surprisingly, successful leaders in the more mature accountability contexts were less consumed with (or had become desensitized to) worries over the sometimes negative steering effects of many accountability initiatives – reduced autonomy and public shaming through publication of league tables, for example, – and more intent on harnessing government accountability initiatives to their own school's priorities. The US paper also mentioned the "stage in a school's capacity for improvement" as a potential antecedent.

In the more mature accountability contexts, a large proportion of the successful principals even used external demands for greater accountability as a tool for overcoming longstanding resistance to change on the part of small numbers of their teachers. But in Norway, the more recent introduction of accountability policies introduced substantial tensions into leaders' external contexts because of the long histories of teacher autonomy and the widespread celebration of democratic values in both schools and their wider communities.

The country reports described a handful of potential external antecedents. These included, level of schooling (e.g. elementary vs middle), school size, location (e.g. urban, rural), status of school (e.g. "School Under Registration Review," in US), type (government vs catholic). These are all plausible influences on the emergence of successful school leadership.

The country reports, in sum, enlighten us about how variations in the degree and form of accountability demanded by the policy context shape the enactment of practices used by successful principal leaders. These results are consistent with evidence from the few other studies which have inquired about the issue ([Belchetz, 2005](#)).

Evidence about other factors stimulating leadership practices in the wider research literature beyond the country reports is modest, at best. A very restricted range of variables has been explored and there is little accumulation of evidence about any of those variables that have been studied. This neglect is surprising since a great deal of the educational leadership literature claims that the context in which leaders work is of enormous importance in determining what they do. But such claims typically have prompted research about leadership in one context at a time – for example, whole school reform ([Brooks et al., 2004](#)), technology ([Anderson and Dexter, 2005](#)), minority student populations ([Riehl, 2002](#)), and social justice.

These "one-context-at-a-time" studies tell us little about how variations in context are related to variations in leadership practices, the kind of evidence that is needed if we are to become clearer about the factors stimulating successful leadership practices.

Variables linking principals' practices to student learning

The indirect nature of a high proportion of school leadership effects has prompted research about those variables or conditions in classrooms and schools that:

- are open to significant influence by those in leadership roles; and
- produce demonstrable improvements in student learning.

Variables meeting both these requirements are identified in the seven country reports and many of them have been identified in previous research.

Classroom variables fitting this description include:

1. Time on task: among the strongest variables to emerge from the teaching effects research ([Smyth, 1987](#)) and identified in the Australian report.
2. Quality of instruction/instructional climate: reports from Norway, Australia and the US identify this mediator, one for which there is considerable other evidence of its effects on student learning ([Biddle and Dunkin, 1987](#)).

3. Curriculum: also identified in the Australian, Norwegian and US reports, considerable additional evidence links curricula rich in ideas and engaging for students to improvements in their learning ([Brophy, 2003](#)).
4. School variables found to be mediators of principals' effects in the country reports and supported by substantial previous evidence include.
5. Safe and orderly climate: a "charter member" of the effective schools correlates ([Teddle and Stringfield, 1993](#)) this variable was identified in the Australian and US reports.
6. Staff participation in school-wide decision making, a variable which has attracted considerable research interest for decades ([Conley, 1991](#)). The Chinese cases illustrate the importance of such participation even in a high power-distance culture.
7. School culture: identified in all country reports, this mediator has widely reported effects on students ([Deal, 2005](#)) and has been a significant focus for principals' intervention ([Leithwood et al., 1990](#)).
8. Teacher commitment: a key part of the report from England, China and Denmark, for example, such commitment is strongly endorsed by a considerable amount of previous evidence ([Dannetta, 2002](#)).

The country reports, in sum, do reinforce the importance of some mediators found in previous research. Such research, however, has identified many others including, for example, collective teacher efficacy ([Goddard et al., 2000](#)), sense of professional community ([Louis and Kruse, 1995](#)), organizational learning processes ([Silins and Mulford, 2004](#)), school goals ([Hallinger and Heck, 1996](#)), teacher capacity and experience ([Glass, 2002](#)), and procedures for monitoring student progress ([Walberg, 1984](#)). Qualitative research is helpful in exploring more fully just how leaders influence specific mediators but is likely less helpful in documenting the range of promising mediators and judging their relative power.

Conditions enhancing or diminishing principals' effects

Our interest in this section is with features of the organizational or wider social context in which principals work that depress, neutralize or enhance the strength or nature of relationships between leadership practices and their effects on students and the school organization. The same behaviors may have quite different effects on teachers, for example, depending on teachers' gender, age, amount of experience or levels of stress; so these become promising moderators.

The country reports, as a whole, identified six possible conditions with such effects. Evidence about student background factors was reported in four of the seven country reports. The English, Danish, Chinese, Australian and US reports described the school's location (e.g. rural, urban). The US, Danish, Chinese and Norwegian reports included attention to school size and the extent of mutual trust and respect to be found in the relationship between leaders and teachers and/or teachers and students. The government or public vs non-government designation of schools was reported in the English and Australian cases. And the US, Danish, Chinese, Australian and English cases report school level (elementary, middle, secondary).

Evidence from earlier research suggests that most of these six variables have the potential to moderate leadership effects: see, for example, [Hallinger et al. \(1996\)](#) on student background factors; [Louis and Miles \(1990\)](#) on school location; [Howley \(2002\)](#) on school size; [Tyler and DeGoey \(1996\)](#) on levels of trust; and [Bryk et al. \(1984\)](#) on public vs private schools. As well, a small number of moderators not touched on in the country reports have surfaced in other school leadership research. In their recent review, for example, [Leithwood and Jantzi \(2005\)](#) found a consistent pattern of results suggesting that leadership effects are enhanced or augmented by prior student achievement, family educational culture, organizational culture, shared school goals, and coherent plans and policies, in addition to those moderators touched on in the country reports. But there has been little accumulation of evidence about other potential moderators.

The country reports, in sum, usefully draw attention to a number of important leadership moderators and argue that such moderators ought to be considered in school leadership research. Much like the majority of other school leadership studies, however, these case studies do not provide a theoretical rationale for their choice of moderators, admittedly not often the intention of researchers aiming to develop grounded theory, as were some of our authors. Nor do they actually examine the extent to which variation in a selected moderator enhances or mutes leadership effects. Rather, evidence about these variables is treated more as background, as a means of ensuring similarity of schools on a key variable (e.g. all US cases were "high needs"), or as a means of ensuring that the schools included in the research represent the full range of states on each variable (e.g. school level in the Australian and Norwegian cases).

Our understanding of school leadership effects would be much improved by future research inquiring about the consequences of variation in the status of theoretically defensible sets of moderators.

Conclusion

Two goals have been pursued in this paper: to synthesize the results of the seven country reports included in this issue of the journal; and to consider the extent to which qualitative research pursued on a large scale is capable of addressing the limitations of qualitative research as it is typically pursued (i.e. on a small scale and often without much coordination across studies). I return to the five limitations of such research identified at the outset and consider how well our international project, one instance of qualitative research pursued on a large scale, has responded.

Is the work cumulative? Often qualitative leadership research consists of “one-off” studies guided by unique perspectives that are not revisited in subsequent studies by the original researchers or others who might follow. The country reports provide encouraging signs of progress in addressing this limitation. Such progress seems primarily due to the development of multiple cases, over time, within each country. This allows for ongoing refinement of ideas and data collection techniques, eventually resulting in the cross-case reports appearing in this issue. These reports provide some indication, as well, that researchers are beginning to learn from their colleagues in other countries. The use of a common frame for describing leadership practices in three of the reports could be viewed as a sign of such learning. But, to date, the cross-country accumulation of evidence is reflected more in the synthesis provided by this paper than in individual country reports.

The time seems right for individual researchers in the international project to take greater account of evidence and ideas from the work of their colleagues in other countries. There is a high level of agreement about the importance of doing more of this in our subsequent work.

Qualitative research is often justified as “grounded theory” development, thereby lessening the pressure to build on previous evidence; sometimes such evidence is actively put aside because it is viewed as a constraint on future progress. But English-language research has now produced at least some useful evidence about many key aspects of school leadership, as well as its causes and consequences. Do the country reports build on this evidence? My reading of the reports suggests progress on a broken front. Several reports primarily draw on frameworks and ideas from other fields to make sense of their data. This can have significant advantages to a field of study when more established frameworks in the field are explicitly considered, self-consciously put aside and reasons for adopting quite different frameworks and ideas are provided. Simply ignoring established frameworks and ideas, however, contributes little to progress in the field.

Perhaps the most obvious limitation of typical forms of qualitative research is its lack of external validity. A major justification for the ambitious number of cases included in the present phase of the international project was the possibility of producing combined results strong on both internal and external validity. To what extent is this happening? Once again, the answer provided by the seven country reports is mixed. The number of cases being developed in some countries is beginning to approximate sample sizes not uncommon in quantitative research. So we are “nibbling” at the lower edges of external validity within countries. But “representing” school leadership within even one country is not something most quantitative leadership research does very well, either. My expectation is that, in combination with the large-scale quantitative evidence we intend to collect in next stage of our work, we will be in a better position than virtually any other project, to date, to depict the general tendencies associated with successful leadership within and across the countries included in the international project. But very high levels of representativeness or generalizability is likely an unrealistic goal unless we are surprised by the lack of variation in our data.

Have key variables been appropriately manipulated? This is where the seven country reports are likely weakest. The number of cases that are possible, even in a large project of this sort, does not permit the degree of manipulation required to form robust conclusions. The reports do, for example, identify many potential leadership antecedents and moderators. Indeed, the reports even explicitly aim to inquire about the consequences for leadership of variation in some of these factors. But it turns out to be very difficult work largely because of the number of cases. It may be more productive in future qualitative leadership studies to sample leaders and schools holding the status of key factors (such as school level) constant rather than sampling in order to represent variation. Large-scale quantitative research is better suited to this task.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the country reports do quite a good job of overcoming some of the weaknesses typical of qualitative leadership research. And more progress is certainly possible, for example, by increasing the engagement of the research team in shared discussion of promising conceptual frameworks, key ideas in the leadership field, and the merits and pitfalls of their use across the country research initiatives. But no realistic amount of qualitative research seems likely to address all those limitations. This issue of *JEA*, then, may be considered an evidence-based argument for methodological eclecticism in future research on school leadership.

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