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EDITORIAL

School leadership that makes a difference: international perspectives

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This special theme issue of *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* examines trends in thinking about how school leadership makes a difference in schools around the world. The introduction to this special issue first places this topic and the relevant articles in a historical context. Then the editors offer brief descriptions of the articles highlighting their contributions to the overall theme.

Keywords: principal; school improvement; international

Introduction

Leadership has increasingly been seen as a key factor in organizational (Yukl, 2006) as well as school effectiveness (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). The increased interest in educational leadership evidenced over recent decades is due to the trend of continuous reforms of education systems throughout the world (Fullan, 2004; Hallinger, 2010, 2011). These changes have led to a dramatic growth in the importance of the role assigned to school leaders, both individually and collectively. This is evident in system policies adopted globally that have sought to transform leadership structures (e.g., school-based management) and roles (e.g., instructional leadership), while at the same time revamping approaches to school leadership preparation and development (see Hallinger, 2003; Huber, 2004).

This policy-driven interest in school leadership has been accompanied by greater scholarly effort aimed at understanding how leadership contributes to school effectiveness and improvement (e.g., Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Huber & Muijs, 2010; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). While conceptual and empirical efforts were initially concentrated in North America (e.g., Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Bridges, 1967; Dwyer, 1985; Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996; Hallinger & Heck, 1996, 1998; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Heck, Larson, & Marcoulides, 1990; Pitner, 1988), the past decade has witnessed the evolution of interest in “leadership for learning” into a global phenomenon spanning North America, Europe, and Asia Pacific (e.g., Bell, Bolam, & Cubillo, 2003; MacBeath &

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Cheng, 2008; Mulford & Silins, 2003; Muijs, 2007; Robinson et al., 2008; Townsend & MacBeath, 2011; Walker & Ko, 2011; Witziers, Bosker, & Krüger, 2003).

This special issue of *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* seeks to contribute to the continuing development of this global knowledge base. Historically, this special issue is located in the lineage of previous theme issues focusing on this topic published by international journals in educational leadership and management (e.g., *Educational Administrative Quarterly*, 18(3) in 1982; *Journal of Educational Administration*, 30(3) in 1992; *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 5(3) in 1994). The current issue is, however, distinguished by the *explicitly international set of papers* that focus on leadership practice and effects in a wide range of different national contexts. This contrasts with prior efforts to bring together research on school leadership effects (e.g., the special issues noted above), in which the scope of research has often been limited to a more narrow set of “Western” education contexts, usually the USA, Canada, the UK, and Australia. While our current special issue is not explicitly *comparative* in nature, it does seek to illuminate how both the exercise of leadership and its effects differ across different international contexts.

Discussions of leadership for learning and instructional leadership can be traced back to normative traditions that emphasized the importance of leadership in American education (e.g., Grobman & Hynes, 1956; Uhls, 1962). Early published attempts at conceptual and empirical research that sought to understand how leadership contributed to school learning and quality also had their origins in the USA (e.g., Bridges, 1967; Gross & Herriott, 1965; Lipham, 1961). However, with the advent of the effective schools movement in the 1980s, instructional leadership assumed a higher profile (Bossert et al., 1982; Edmonds, 1979). During the 1980s and 1990s, this led to a dramatic growth in empirical research on school leadership effects, with increasingly optimistic interpretations concerning the impact of leadership on learning and school improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 1998).

We would note during this period, interest in leadership and learning was no longer confined to North America but also began to develop an international following among practitioners and scholars (e.g., Rutter, 1983; Van de Grift, 1990). Yet, research conducted on school leadership effects outside of North America did not always yield similar results (e.g., The Netherlands, Van de Grift, 1987, 1989, 1990; Witziers et al., 2003). These differential findings highlighted the possible impact that *national context* might have on both the practice and effects of school leadership (e.g., Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Witziers et al., 2003).

Concurrently, during the 1990s, the globalization of education and educational policy was stimulating global efforts to understand how educational practice and results differed in countries around the world (e.g., Lockheed & Levin, 1993). In educational leadership and management, this sparked a new interest in exploring the potential value offered by international and comparative perspectives on leadership practice (e.g., Bajunid, 1996; Cheng, 1995; Hallinger, 1995; Hallinger, Walker, & Bajunid, 2005; Walker & Dimmock, 2002). This, in turn, has led to an ever-expanding volume of conceptual and empirical research aimed at understanding leadership practice and effects across different national contexts. The current issue of *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* seeks to build on these prior efforts.

This theme issue is drawn from a set of papers presented at the *Asia Leadership Roundtable 2010*, sponsored by the *Asia Pacific Centre for Leadership and Change* at the Hong Kong Institute of Education in Hong Kong in January 2010. The purpose

of the Roundtable meeting was to explore the state of the art in research on school leadership and to develop an agenda for accelerating the development of empirically based knowledge in the Asia Pacific region. With this purpose in mind, leading scholars, selected both from the region and globally, presented papers that sought to map existing knowledge in the field at large, identify unique challenges facing educational leadership in Asia Pacific, and propose promising approaches to conceptualizing and carrying out relevant high impact empirical research. This special issue presents a subset of papers written for the *Asia Leadership Roundtable 2010*.

Issue objectives

The purpose of this special issue is to present current conceptual and empirical research on leadership practices and their effects on schools across the globe. More specifically, our objectives include the following:

- (1) to examine emerging approaches to conceptualizing the study of school leadership internationally;
- (2) to explore leadership practices and effects in a wide range of national contexts;
- (3) to present state-of-the-art methods being used in the conduct of empirical research on leadership and school improvement.

Contributions to the special issue

This special issue contains contributions focusing on educational leadership in four specific national contexts: China, USA, The Netherlands, and Hong Kong. In addition, one article examines leadership across a wide range of international contexts. It is interesting to note that the contributions that comprise this issue reflect variation in stages as well as traditions in the development of the field of educational leadership and management around the world. Thus, the pieces focusing on China and Hong Kong employ literature review and conceptual analysis aimed at laying the groundwork for empirical investigation. In contrast, the other three contributions employ a combination of advanced statistical and longitudinal modeling aimed at exploring theoretical and practice-related propositions.

The article co-authored by Allan Walker (Hong Kong Institute of Education), Rongkun Hu (Beijing Institute of Education), and Haiyan Qian (Fudan University/Hong Kong Institute of Education), “Principal Leadership in China: An Initial Review”, presents a review of literature on the Chinese principalship. Unfortunately, most of the literature written on school leadership and management in China has been written in Mandarin and published in Chinese journals. This literature is, therefore, largely inaccessible to scholars internationally. The goal of this article is to provide access to this literature through a review of research reports on the principalship in China written in English and Chinese between 1998 and 2008.

The authors focus on identifying trends in the literature on principal practice in China. As noted in the report, the literature on principal leadership in China is dominated by prescriptive and descriptive reports, the latter referred to by the authors as commentaries. Prescriptions focus on telling principals what they need to do to be successful, especially in the present reform environment. Commentaries focus on the key concerns and problems confronting principals. The authors provide

both analysis and synthesis of the literature and pose questions intended to guide future research in this burgeoning field.

Dora Ho (Hong Kong Institute of Education) and Leon Tikly's (University of Bristol) article, "Conceptualizing Teacher Leadership in a Chinese, Policy-Driven Context: A Research Agenda", considers the relevance and application of the leadership construct of distributed leadership in the Chinese educational context of Hong Kong. The Western discourse on distributed leadership has grown rapidly since early work of Gronn, Spillane, Barth, and others at the turn of the century. A fundamental tenet of distributed leadership lies in its emphasis on empowerment of staff within the informal organization of the school. In recent years, this concept has attracted increased attention in Chinese societies that have traditionally relied on highly centralized administrative systems in which power is located in the person of the school principal. This article explores the implications of applying the concept of distributed leadership in a Chinese context and outlines a research agenda for future work in this area. The author uses teacher leadership in early childhood education in Hong Kong as an illustrative case. She suggests that change agency, collaboration, collegiality, power, and authority are key aspects of discourse on teacher leadership in a Chinese, policy-driven context.

Henry May (University of Pennsylvania), Jason Huff (University of Tennessee), and Ellen Goldring (Vanderbilt University) have co-authored an article, "A Longitudinal Study of Principals' Activities and Student Performance". Despite the increasing volume of research on principal leadership and its effects, the authors argue that most of this research has employed cross-sectional surveys. Moreover, although researchers have explored in some depth what principals do, little of this research has explored how principals allocate their time to different leadership activities and how these variations could impact student performance.

Their article presents results from a 3-year longitudinal study of principal activities and student performance. Using HLM growth modelling, they explore how principals' activities are associated with changes in student performance over time. Their results suggest that principals' activities are remarkably variable over time, that specific leadership activities are more prevalent in some school contexts, and that specific changes in leadership activities over time do not predict changes in student performance in a consistent manner across schools. These findings match previous cross-sectional findings that emphasize the limited direct connections between leadership and student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Heck & Hallinger, 2010). The authors point towards potentially important mediating and moderating variables in future longitudinal analyses to capture more closely the indirect and complex relationships between leaders' practices and their student achievement.

Erik Thoonen (University of Amsterdam), Peter Slegers (University of Twente), Frans Oort (University of Amsterdam), and Thea Peetsma (University of Amsterdam) have contributed an article, "Building School-Wide Capacity for Improvement: The Role of Leadership, School Organizational Conditions, and Teacher Factors". This article explores the connection between leadership and capacity for improvement, a variable of increasing interest among scholars focusing on leadership and school improvement (e.g., Fullan, 2004; Heck & Hallinger, 2009, 2010). The global trend of increased accountability of schools assumes that schools are capable of building their capacity for continuous improvement. While policy-makers, scholars, and practitioners acknowledge the importance of building

school-wide capacity for continuous improvement, empirical evidence to this effect remains thin.

In this study, the authors examine the extent to which school improvement capacity develops over time in a sample of elementary schools in The Netherlands. Leadership practices, school organizational conditions, teacher motivation, and teacher learning were used to measure school-wide capacity for improvement. Mixed-model analysis of longitudinal data from 1,010 teachers of 32 Dutch elementary schools showed that schools are capable of building school-wide capacity, and that sustaining a high level of capacity seemed to be more difficult. The findings suggest that improving leadership may be an important first step in the process of building school-wide capacity.

The final article in this issue, “National Contexts Influencing Principals’ Time Use and Allocation: Economic Development, Societal Culture, and Educational System”, was co-authored by Lee Moosung and Philip Hallinger (Hong Kong Institute of Education). As noted earlier, this is the only study in the issue that adopted an explicitly cross-national comparative perspective. Its purpose is to examine the impact of macrocontext factors on the practice of school principals. More specifically, the article illuminates how a nation’s level of national economic development, societal culture, and educational system influence the amount of time principals devote to their job role and shape their allocation of time to curriculum and pedagogical development, administration, and management of relationships with parents and community. This focus on time allocation of principals shares a similar perspective with the May et al. study, although this does not seek to examine the linkage between practices and school outcomes. Rather, the study explores the impact of important moderators on leadership practice.

The study employed a two-level hierarchical linear model (HLM) to analyze data on 5,297 principals in 34 societies drawn from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2006. The results support the proposition that principal time use and allocation varies substantially across societies and that these patterns of practice are influenced by economic, sociocultural, and institutional features of their societies. The study contributes to a growing body of research that seeks to understand how the practice of school leadership is shaped by the organizational and cultural context.

Implications drawn from these studies

As noted at the outset of this introduction, we noted that the contributions included in this special issue of *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* fall within the lineage of past theme issues that have sought to understand school leadership practice and effects on schools. Taken together, we can locate the articles at the nexus of several important trends in the field of educational leadership and management. In this brief concluding section, we wish to delineate these trends.

We begin with discussing key moderators of leadership practice. Several of papers attend to potentially important factors in the school and its environment that moderate or shape the practice of leadership in schools. Simply stated, this line of inquiry seeks to illuminate how leadership practices (e.g., distributed leadership) are adapted to the constraints, needs, and opportunities that exist under different organizational conditions. The end goal of this program of research is to develop a contextualized understanding of how leadership practices achieve effects in different school settings and under different organizational conditions.

Several of the articles contribute towards this agenda. For example, May and colleagues employ a contrasting groups research design to shed light on differences in principal time allocation in schools. The Walker et al. and Ho and Tikly articles explore how features of the sociocultural context embedded in Chinese societies impact both perspectives and practices of school leaders. Lee and Hallinger elaborate on both of these categories of moderators by explicitly examining how principal practice differs across varying institutional and sociocultural contexts. As has been noted both within this issue as well as by other scholars (e.g., Belchetz & Leithwood, 2007; Goldring, Huff, May, & Camburn, 2008; Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger et al., 2005; Walker & Dimmock, 2002), the exploration how leadership is exercised within specific contexts represents, in our view, one of the high priority items on the research agenda in our field.

A second trend that we wish to highlight concerns the focus on principal time allocation and use. We have noted an increased interest in employing this approach to understanding principal practice (e.g., Hornig, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010). Within the special issue, this focus was evident in both the May et al. and Lee and Hallinger articles. We believe that this approach to illuminating patterns of practices continues to hold promise, especially when combined with the use of moderators as in the case of these two studies. That is, the purpose of such studies should not be limited to describing principal practice, but to link it to moderators as in the Lee and Hallinger article, or to both moderators and outcomes as in the articles contributed by May and his colleagues as well as by Thoonen and his colleagues.

A third trend concerns the use of a variety of research strategies in the study of educational leadership. That is, no single “method” is adequate to the task of advancing knowledge in our field. Literature reviews and conceptual analyses (e.g., the Walker et al. and Ho & Tikly articles) play an important role by finding problems and laying down markers in the journey of scholarly inquiry. Studies that incorporate qualitative analysis (e.g., Ho & Tikly’s article) are essential for uncovering new perspectives, describing practice in depth, and generating hypotheses for testing through quantitative methods. Quantitative methods are necessary for assessing the validity of programs and practices, and for demonstrating trends across large numbers of cases, whether schools or individuals.

We would be remiss if we did not take further note that several of the articles in this issue provide useful examples of studies that employed advanced modelling techniques to explore moderate to large samples of data on leadership practice and effects. In this regard, we highlight the use of HLM techniques in the May et al. and Lee and Hallinger studies, and mixed models in the Thoonen et al. article. In addition, as in the past (e.g., Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Heck & Hallinger, 2009, 2010), we continue to encourage researchers to seek out and analyze longitudinal data sets that enable us to gain a perspective on how the effects of leadership unfold over time. Both the May et al. and Thoonen et al. studies offer ample evidence of the additional leverage gained by focusing on change over time rather than a snapshot of what the organizational system looks like at one point in time.

Finally, these studies offer insight into key mediators of the effects of principal leadership. The focus on exploring how school leaderships are mediated by features of the school traces back to the work of Bossert and colleagues (1982), Pitner (1988), as well as Hallinger and Heck (1998). More recently, scholars (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010) have reemphasized the need to uncover the paths through leadership impacts learning. In particular, we highlight the article by

Thoonen et al., which focuses on the school's *capacity for improvement*. This focus offers a useful linkage between leadership practice and outcomes as well as between different models of leadership (e.g., transformational and instructional). Thus, we encourage future research that explores this particular path.

In closing, these contributions reflect the increasingly rich and diverse approaches to research on school leadership that is being conducted internationally. In a globalized world of education, we believe that it is the responsibility of scholarly journals to convey the relevance of research beyond the traditional domains of academic activity located in North America and Europe. We hope that this special issue makes a small contribution towards this effort.

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