

Foreword: A Message from the Founder of ISSPP

This is an important book for taking forward a research informed agenda for the development and support of policies for raising standards in Mexican schools. Without the leadership of principals who can demonstrate and enact their values through the design and consistent application of time and context sensitive strategies it is unlikely that schools will improve. Successful principals have an understanding of school improvement phases and the importance of leading and participating in professional learning and development as a key means of building the capacities of teachers and their commitment and resilience. These are the principals who lead schools which improve the progress and attainment of their students.

The work reported in this book is part of the outcomes of the work of the International Successful School Principalship Project research network. The ISSPP now has members from 25 different countries. It began at a meeting of five interested parties from Canada, Australia, Sweden and England held in the University of Nottingham, England in 2001. At that meeting, it was agreed that, whilst there was much research and writing about school principals, much of it was based upon self-report, limited to quantitative 'school effectiveness' studies, which, while valuable, were not able to answer the 'How' and 'Why' questions, and did not focus upon 'successful' schools and school principals specifically. Those present at the meeting agreed that conducting multi-perspective case studies of schools deemed to be successful in each country would provide valuable evidence, which would contribute to knowledge about the principalship and help inform policy and practice. The project was the first of its kind. It has resulted in a comprehensive picture of the characteristics and strategies of successful school leaders in primary and secondary schools in different socio-economic circumstances in different jurisdictions. Now ISSPP members in 25 countries have developed case studies, organised national and international dissemination conferences and produced numerous academic papers in reputable journals internationally, as well as several special issues and books.

The origins of the ISSPP's research methodology are to be found in an earlier multi-perspective study of schools in England (Day et al., 2000). The primary aim of that research had been to: i) collect data from a multiplicity of perspectives including those of head teachers, deputy head teachers, governors, parents, students, support staff and teachers; ii) compare effective headship in contexts ranging from small primary schools to large urban secondary schools; iii) identify the personal qualities and

professional competencies which are generic to effective headship in schools; iv) re-examine existing theoretical perspectives on school headship through insight derived from new empirical research; and v) contribute to the wider educational debate on the relationships between headship and school effectiveness and improvement. A sample of case study schools was selected. These were of different size and phase, located in a range of economic and socio-cultural settings, in which head teachers were widely acknowledged as being "effective" head teachers over time. In that study, "effective" head teachers were selected against the following criteria:

- Schools which had received a positive external and independent Inspection Report by OFSTED (The Government accountable Office for Standards in Education), particularly with regard to student progress and attainment the quality of leadership and management of head teachers;
- Schools which, on the basis of "league tables" of tests and examination results could be shown to be improving performance over time more than the "value added" local and national means;
- Schools in which the head teachers were widely acknowledged by their professional peers as being effective leaders.

In this ISSPP research strand, schools and principals were selected in each research site using, whenever possible, evidence of student achievement beyond expectations on state or national tests, principals' exemplary reputations in the community and/or school system, and other indicators of success that were site-specific. In other words, the criteria for selecting principals were based on a range of evidence that the school had been successful during the period of their leadership.

In our preparation, we found that much of the research was on principals generally or effective schools but not on successful principals and, where this was the focus, it was largely based upon self-report, narrative single lens accounts, input-output measures, and theoretical perspectives from the world of business. Notwithstanding Leithwood's work over a number of years combining the empirical and conceptual, we were intrigued by five questions which did not yet seem to have been answered:

- i) What similarities and differences can be identified in the beliefs and behaviours of successful school principals across national cultures and policy contexts?
- ii) Do different countries have different ways of defining success?
- iii) How do high-stake assessments and accountability measures influence the practices of successful principals?
- iv) Do different socio-economic contexts in which schools operate affect the ways in which successful principals work? Are different qualities and skills needed?
- v) How do successful principals come to be successful? How do they learn about their work and acquire the skills needed to create and sustain school improvement?

In designing this strand of the ISSPP project we took these into account and, from the beginning, were guided by agreement on three precepts:

- Multi-perspective data about successful principals will provide richer, more authentic data than has hitherto been available.
- Such data is best provided by those with close knowledge of the principal i.e. teachers, students, parents, non-teaching members of the school and other community members.
- Collaborative research designed to a set of agreed common protocols across English and non-English speaking countries will provide understandings of and insights into successful principals and school improvement, which will add to existing knowledge.

In one sense we now "know" already what successful principals looks like. In America, the Task Force on Developing Research in Educational Leadership of Division A of the American Educational Research Association presented a summary of well documented understandings (Leithwood and Riehl, 2003). Recently, these have been developed into seven and the ten strong research based claims for successful school leadership', as part of a government funded project in England (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins, 2006; Day et al, 2010). In England, also, the government has provided detailed National Standards for Head teachers (DfES, 2004) based upon its view of the key characteristics of principals. Indeed, defining "standards" has become an increasingly popular activity for many governments as they focus upon promoting (largely rational) forms of leadership and management which will provide the optimum outcomes in terms of measurable student achievement gains. Furthermore, in a wide ranging review of secondary schools functioning in the context of educational reform, Silins and Mulford (2003) went so far as to identify three "major, aligned and sequential factors in high school reforms" i.e. how people are treated, the presence of a professional learning community; and the presence of a capacity for learning. A later meta- analysis of the quantitative research on effective leadership (Robinson et al, 2009) identified the prime importance of instructional leadership.

In order to counter the possibility of fragmentation of effort and energy as "managers" focus upon fulfilling their accountabilities and responsibilities, it seems that successful principals are those whose educational agendas go far beyond meeting the demands of external systems of performativity and strict accountability; rather, they encourage the development of communities of learning, supporting a strong mutually supportive, collective service ethic (Talbert and McLaughlin, 1994; 2001). Five elements essential to the building and sustaining of schools as learning communities are shared moral purpose, collegial norms and values, focus on student learning, reflective dialogue, sharing of practice, collaboration and inclusivity (Louis, Kruse and Marks, 1996; Sebring and Bryk, 2000). They are those also, who recognise that successful schools need many leaders.

Successful principals, also, have come to understand the importance of and are able to work with the emotional and intellectual capital embedded in all members of the school community, the social capital embedded in the relationships between

individuals and groups, and the organisational capital embedded in the school's structure and cultures (Hargreaves, 1999). Most importantly, they ensure that teachers are at the heart of the creation of such learning communities (Day, 1999). There is a tension between focussing effort upon building capacity in such communities which distribute power and decision-making and the bureaucratic model of leadership suggested by the pressures of achieving success in the current policy results-orientated environment. Successful principals, it seems, ensure that one supports the other, despite the tensions evident between their purposes. Multiple rather than single forms of leaderships seem to be what are required, then, in today's international policy contexts. As Hayes et al. (2001) note in their empirical study of "productive" leadership in Australian schools:

"... style is not as important as the willingness of ... principals to contribute to the development of broad-based learning communities within their schools ..."

(Hayes et al., 2001, p. 15)

What we did not know when the ISSPP network began was whether successful school principals in different countries, with different cultures and at different phases of system, qualifications and understandings of successful leadership and its impact on student progress and achievement held similar values, possessed similar qualities and used similar strategies to achieve success. We know now from the empirical research conducted by ISSPP members in many countries and published widely that there are far more similarities than differences. The sum of research to date in different countries shows also that successful principals do not all lead and manage in the same way. We know also that it is not their 'styles' or 'personalities' that are the most important factors in their success. They are not 'heroic' or 'charismatic' leaders, though they may perform heroic acts it is their values and practices and behaviors that count most. Some may begin as autocrats but gradually build more democratic, participative structures and cultures. All display commitment, courage and resilience.

This book, then, is an important milestone in the development of a corpus of empirically based research on the principal leadership of schools in Mexico. It is my hope that it will be the first of many that will influence policy makers and practitioners as they strive to raise standards of teaching, learning and achievement of all students .

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