Context and challenges for school leaders in the 21st century

We live in an era of complexity where the only stable factor is constant change. In the last 30 years we have seen change as never before. There is a new international economic order and, it could be argued, also a new international ‘ethical’ order in our knowledge society. Whereas it took humanity about 5,000 years to move from the agricultural era, it is taking us less than a decade to move from the information and computer era towards the biogenetics era. Educational leaders around the globe will need to work in this context and lead the way in the educational arena for the decades to come (Pashiardis, 2009). What this means is that school leaders will need to operate in an era that is becoming increasingly more turbulent and less predictable, and where paradox, ambiguity and uncertainty are becoming the norm. Where nation-states, in order to be internationally present and to avoid marginalisation, have to create alliances and start forming regional and international networks in order to survive; thus, educational leaders need to think globally but, at the same time, act locally.

In this new school environment, there is increasing recognition of the importance of school leadership in supporting change and providing for educational quality. In fact, school leadership has been identified by a number of researchers as a key element in the effectiveness of school organisations (Gronn and Ribbins, 2003; Marzano, Waters and McNulty, 2005; Kythreotis and Pashiardis, 2006). The concept of ‘leadership’ holds a core position in the various theories of management science as well as in the daily operation of contemporary organisations. Acknowledging the critical importance of leadership, a number of theorists and researchers have analysed the meaning of leadership. Although rich insights into the concept have been provided, there is still no single, broadly accepted definition of leadership (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; 1998; Witziers, Bosker and Krüger, 2003).

Pashiardis (2004, p.209) defines leadership as ‘the nexus of those behaviours used with others when trying to influence their own behaviours’. That is, a leader is the person who influences through his/her behaviour, the behaviour of the people in his/her group. In this way, he/she energises the organisation members towards the accomplishment of a common vision. According to Hoy and Miskel (2008), what is common in most definitions is the enactment of ‘intentional influence over others to structure activities and relationships in a group or organisation’ (p.419).
being superior to the other two, but at the same time, he deems that a good leader has to be a good administrator and a good manager as well. The terms are complementary to each other, but none can reflect by itself what a contemporary leader ought to be doing.

The distinctions between leadership, management and administration are essential to understanding the roles and professional development needs of school principals in a more functional and operational manner. Moreover, in view of the complex and changing context of education, school leadership has gained growing attention by educational policy-makers. This is why various stakeholders have increased their expectations from school principals demanding, for instance, higher academic results and performance standards. There is a general agreement on the need to have school leaders who exhibit the capacity to improve the quality of teaching and learning that takes place in their schools. School effectiveness as well as school improvement research has demonstrated the importance of the role of the leader in school life. Apart from individual states, international organisations are beginning to realise the key role of school leaders in providing access to quality education for all students. This ascertainment has led to a growing recognition that the professional development of school leaders could contribute significantly to the improvement of their practices.

In this context, school leaders’ roles and responsibilities have been (or need to be) reconceptualised to recognise the new, far larger, more demanding set of roles they have to cope with. For example:

i. learning to deal with enhanced administrative and managerial tasks;
ii. handling financial resources as well as human resources;
iii. managing public relations and building coalitions;
iv. engaging in quality management and public reporting processes;
v. providing leadership for training their staff.

There is thus a need to recruit and develop a new generation of school leaders with the knowledge, skills and dispositions best suited to meet the current and future needs of education systems. In many countries, there is the growing concern that the role of school principal was designed for the needs of a different time and may not be appropriate to deal with the challenges schools are facing in the 21st century (Brauckmann, 2008).

The Commonwealth Secretariat recently commissioned a study on school leaders’ training needs around the Commonwealth to provide answers to the professional development needs of school principals. Within this context, the two researchers who undertook the study developed a framework depicting the way forward in terms of school leaders’ professional development for the 21st century. In particular, they focused on the following guiding questions:

- In what kind of context do school leaders operate, at the system as well as at the local level? (see left column)

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Diagram 1 The Pashiardis-Brauckmann Co-LEAD Framework

![Image of the Pashiardis-Brauckmann Co-LEAD Framework]

- **Contextual variables** (Nature of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity)
  - System level
    - Demography
    - Economy
    - School leaders’ resource potential
    - Patterns of decentralisation
    - Patterns of accountability
  - School level
    - Type of school
    - School Size
    - Location
    - School resources
    - Student-teacher ratio
    - Characteristics of school leaders

- **Leadership variables**
  - School leaders’ role
  - Style
  - Function
  - Self-concept
  - Expectations
  - Motivation
  - Epistemological beliefs
  - Sense of professionalism

- **Personal needs**
  - Knowledge (minds-on)
  - Skills (hands-on)
  - Attitudes-Disposition
  - Physical (work schedule)
  - Motivational Support Mechanism (stress management)

- **Training programmes** (Nature of intervention and support)
  - Training materials
    - Customised-Core
    - Specific-Broad
    - Advanced-Basic
  - Addressees of training
    - Current principals–future principals
    - Pedagogical actors–non-pedagogical actors
  - Training types
    - In service–Pre-service
    - Distance–Contact
    - Compulsory–Non-compulsory
    - Short-term–Long-term
    - Theoretical–Practical
  - Level of governance
    - System level-School level

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How well prepared are school leaders in performing effectively their duties? (see left column)

Where do their needs for professional development lie? (see middle column)

Which forms of professional development do they prefer? (see right column)

**Waving the path for successful leadership**

As mentioned above, in the current era of globalisation, school leadership issues have become increasingly debated and explored in an international and comparative context. This is mainly due to research evidence produced so far that the principal’s role is indeed crucial for improving students’ academic achievement (e.g., Marzano, Waters and McNulty, 2005). If school leadership is important, then we should also be concerned with how leaders learn to do their jobs in ways that contribute to student learning (Crow, Lumby and Pashiardis, 2008).

In light of this, a global focus on leadership development has begun to evolve, and many countries have come to realise the importance of investing in school leadership support systems. Policy-makers in mainland Europe, North America, and Australasia have launched programmes designed to support leadership development in education (Hallinger, 2003).

Education ministers of the countries participating in organisations such as the Commonwealth have emphasised the need to improve school leadership as a way to increase school effectiveness and achieve quality performance. In particular, the 15th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers of 2003 concluded that aspiring leaders should be provided with the opportunities of training and coaching in leadership and management skills (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2003). In addition, the discussions of the 16th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers of 2006 raised the following recommendation (CCEM, 2006):

> Since school principals are key to facilitating and overseeing that quality teaching and learning takes place in schools, the professional development of school leaders through a contextually relevant school principalship qualification should be an approach adopted more widely among member states. (p. 3)

The professional development needs of school principals may be determined by a number of dimensions related to the respective features of training schemes. These dimensions concern the patterns of provision, the design characteristics of the programmes, the delivery modes, and the leadership areas in need of improvement. Therefore, it is essential to review the literature on every one of these aspects in order to gain a holistic picture of what kind of professional development principals really need.

**Preparing the school leaders for the challenges of tomorrow**

It is not surprising that leadership preparation and development has also become a major area of concern. Many countries have focused on providing appropriate training and professional development opportunities to aspiring and practising school leaders. Increasingly, international studies reveal a number of patterns or tendencies in providing school leadership development around the world. On the whole, it seems that those in charge of preparing professional development programmes are aware that schools are not static organisations that need to be administered but learning organisations that require continuous development.

Despite these contemporary trends, there are also countries (mostly developing ones) which, although moving in the right direction, are still lagging behind in providing adequate leadership development. Pheko (2008), referring to Botswana, remarks that there is no formal leadership training policy, while Bush and Oduro (2006) comment that leadership preparation and training is low on the agenda of most African countries in general.

In addition, it is important to point out that principals in many countries are appointed on the basis of irrelevant or insufficient criteria; for example, on the basis of their teaching record rather than their leadership skills, on the basis of long service and experience without any higher academic qualifications (Oduro and Macbeath, 2003), and even on the basis of acquaintances (Lahui-Ako, 2001).

As a result, it is imperative to enquire continuously about the professional development needs of principals in order to determine the form and content of a curriculum for leadership development. Programmes should take into account research evidence on school leaders’ needs, and reflect the working context and the characteristics of each individual leader. In this way, principals can be prepared with relevant leadership knowledge, skills and attitudes in order to face the challenges of the role they have to perform (Lahui-Ako, 2001).

Based on the existing body of literature on the professional development needs of school principals, a number of relevant suggestions arise. For example, leadership development should be provided before appointment to the post (Bush and Heystek, 2006; Pashiardis and Heystek, 2007). The provision of adequate preparation prior to appointment may relieve the principals from the shock of transition and facilitate their socialisation in the school environment under their new role. Professional development should also continue after appointment in order to support principals in facing the diverse challenges they may encounter at school. To this effect, there is a need to establish training provision in relation to the different stages of leadership and after leaders have been evaluated in a formative way. Some specific training needs have been uncovered (Pashiardis and Brauckmann, 2008); for example, the professional development needs of new and experienced principals are not identical. With regard to the content of leadership development, the most desired element brought up in most pieces of research concerns the practice of instructional leadership. According to Hale and Moorman (2003),

> … policy and institutional leaders must remember that the business of schools is teaching and learning, that all education policies must support student achievement and that all preparation programs must develop school leaders who can provide instructional leadership. (p. 19)

Experienced principals seem to need more training on instructional and strategic leadership skills, while inexperienced principals seem to also need training on technical issues, such as financial
management. As a result, differences related to the principals’ career stage must also be accounted for in any training schemes. Other important aspects that need to be included concern school improvement practices, strategic planning, and human resources and financial management.

To cater for these diverse needs it is important to decentralise the provision of these programmes. According to a number of researchers (Bush and Glover, 2004; Pashiardis and Brauckmann, 2008), leadership development should take into account the local contexts within which leaders operate. Professional development can then be provided by a wide array of sources, such as universities, professional associations, governmental agencies and other organisations. Partnerships between various organisations may also enhance the training impact on school leaders. However, it is also necessary to have a central agency in charge of monitoring the quality of professional development programmes. As a result, central quality assurance in conjunction with decentralised provision of professional development is more likely to meet the needs of school principals.

The design of the programmes should also be taken into account. Structural features such as a clear purpose, curriculum coherence, instructional variety and differentiation should form part of any training programme (Peterson, 2002). Attractive funding arrangements should also be incorporated in order to encourage training programme (Peterson, 2002). Attractive funding arrangements should also be incorporated in order to encourage the participation of school principals. This structural design could then be accompanied by the development of a culture of openness, collegiality and trust among the participants. This can be effectively achieved by introducing and embedding clear symbols, norms and ceremonies.

Nevertheless, Hale and Moorman (2003) maintain that the adoption of policy measures is not sufficient and that the implementation of any programme must be accompanied by supportive elements such as formal programme review, technical assistance and monitoring. The providers of both formal and non-formal programmes in South Africa (Bush and Heystek, 2006) made a number of suggestions related to such supportive actions.

1. Co-ordinating training more effectively.
2. Providing post-training support to participants.
3. Evaluating the quality of training programmes.
4. Providing careful attention to knowledge transfer to the school.

In general, there is a need to combine a number of methods in the delivery of professional development programmes. Traditional, course-based programmes tend to be too theoretical and therefore they should be complemented by clinical training practices, such as problem-based learning, mentoring and coaching, and peer networking. These learning experiences are deemed to provide a more authentic approach to the real world challenges encountered by school principals.

In short, capacity building for school leaders could be based on the Needs Assessment Study commissioned by the Commonwealth Secretariat. Moreover, following on from what was presented in its research brief, the Commonwealth could create a Pan-Commonwealth qualification for school leaders, using both traditional methods as well as open and distance methods and through the synergy of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). In this way, we can greatly affect the quality of schooling around the Commonwealth, as research shows that ‘Quality’ starts at the top, or with the school principal, who is ‘the Alpha and the Omega’ of the school (Pashiardis, 1998). To conclude, the Commonwealth cannot afford to be inactive in this important endeavour of training school leaders, because, as one teacher unionist from Barbados put it, ‘one ineffective leader can destroy generations of potential good leaders’.

References


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References


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