The Commonwealth's Co-LEAD project

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School leadership: why does it (still) matter?

We live in an era of complexity. The only stable factor is constant change. In the last 30 years, we have seen change as never before and educational leaders around the globe must learn to adapt to this change and to work within an era that is becoming increasingly more turbulent and less predictable, and where paradox, ambiguity, and uncertainty are becoming the norm.

In view of the complex and changing educational environment, school leadership has gained increased 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 wide agreement on the need to have school leaders who can exhibit an ability to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their schools. Research in school effectiveness and school improvement has demonstrated the importance of the role of the leader in school life, in other words, the principal's role is crucial to improving students' academic achievements. Not only is there growing recognition that the professional development of school leaders could contribute significantly to the improvement of their practices, but also how essential it is to recruit, develop and support effective leaders in schools.

Recruiting, developing and supporting effective school leaders: what has been done so far internationally?

In the current era of globalisation, school leadership issues have become increasingly debated and explored in an international and comparative context. If school leadership is important, then we should also be concerned with how leaders learn to do their jobs in ways that contribute to effective student learning. In the light of this concern, a global focus on leadership development has begun to evolve. In fact, 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.

Education ministers from Commonwealth countries have stressed the need to improve school leadership in order to increase school effectiveness and achieve quality performance. The 15th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in 2003 concluded that aspirant school leaders should be provided with leadership and management skills training. In addition, the discussions of the 16th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in 2006 raised the following recommendation:

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.

Recruiting, developing and supporting effective school leaders: the Co-LEAD approach

Based on the above, the Commonwealth Secretariat commissioned a study called the Commonwealth Project on Leadership in Education Assessment and Development (Co-LEAD). The study's main goal was to find out school leaders' training needs in Commonwealth countries in order to provide some answers to four key questions (see below) and, more specifically, to the professional development needs of school principals.

Within this context, the two researchers who undertook the Needs Assessment Study developed a framework depicting the way forward in terms of school leaders' professional development for the 21st century (see Figure 1 overleaf). In particular, they focused on the following questions:

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

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

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

- What forms of professional development are preferable? (see column right)
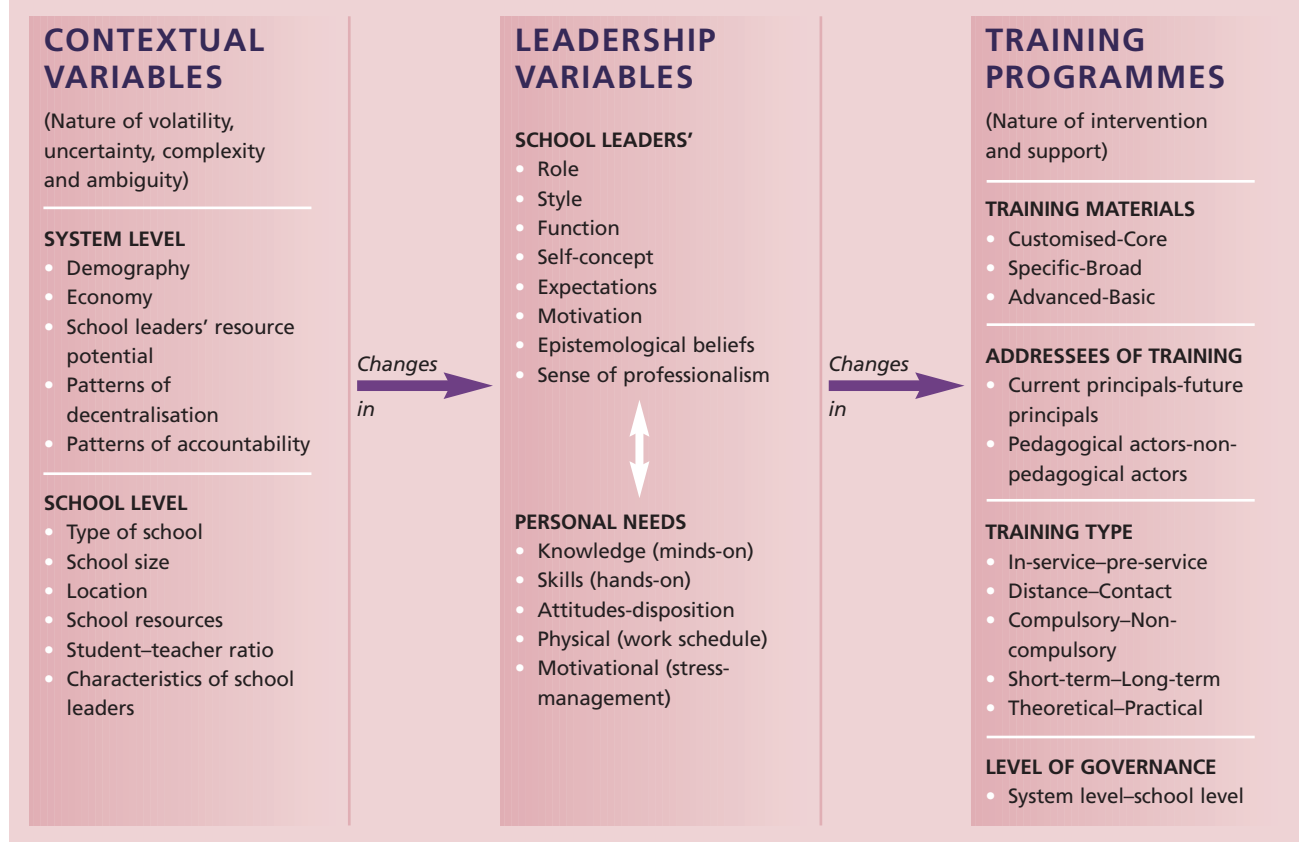
Research design

Based on the guiding questions, two complementary analytical strands were chosen from a methodological point of view.

Contextual factors

Using a variety of inputs and cluster analysis, this analytical strand analysed the contextual factors that shape the role and development of school leaders, as well as the range of policy responses to these factors. The cluster analysis-based regrouping of contextual settings in which school leaders operate, and which can vary markedly across countries, could be useful as background information when it comes to:

(1)   the actual implementation of new training programmes;

Figure 1: Co-LEAD Framework. Pashiardis–Brauchmann 2009

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

Changes in →

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 (stress-management)

Changes in →

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 TYPE
- In-service–pre-service
- Distance–Contact
- Compulsory–Non-compulsory
- Short-term–Long-term
- Theoretical–Practical

LEVEL OF GOVERNANCE
- System level–school level

(2   responding more effectively to the different needs of principals in different types of contextual settings; and

(3   increasing the awareness of the role played by national context in influencing the implementation and impact of leadership policies aimed at developing effective school leaders.

Assessment of the areas in need of professional development

For the fieldwork of the Needs Assessment project, we decided that a mixed methods approach (e.g., both quantitative as well as qualitative) would be best, as one methodology complements and enriches the other.

(i) Quantitative strand

School principals from selected Commonwealth countries were provided with a number of statements taken from worldwide research on effective schools and effective school leaders. As a result, we put together a questionnaire that was pre-tested among school principals in Cyprus (both secondary and primary) in order to examine its validity and reliability. The final questionnaire consisted of 46 statements related to the main functions of school leadership. These statements were grouped into five areas:

(1)   School Climate and School Improvement

(2)   Instructional Leadership and Human Resource Management

(3)   Administration and Fiscal/Facilities Management

(4)   Student Management

(5)   Relations with Parents and the Community.

The purpose of this questionnaire, as explained to the research participants, was (a) to assist in identifying the needs of school principals around the Commonwealth; (b) to identify the current professional capacities of school principals around the Commonwealth; and (c) to assist us in prioritising needs for leadership training.

(ii) Qualitative strand

For this analysis, we organised on-site country visitations and conducted separate focus-group interviews with the following people:

- the country contact person
- a group of school principals
- a group of parents
- a group of teachers/ union leaders.

The main findings of the Co-LEAD project

(i) Contextual factors

Interestingly enough, the new country groupings, which were revealed through the cluster analysis, can be identified (to some extent) as similar to the Commonwealth Secretariat regional clusters based on geography, and can therefore be considered appropriate.

The training and development of school leaders in the Commonwealth calls for an integrated, cross-sectoral approach to educational planning. Of course, there is no single model of leadership that can be easily transferred across different school-level and system-level contexts. The specific contexts in which school leaders operate may limit school leaders' room for manoeuvre or provide opportunities for different types of leadership.

(ii) Assessment of the areas in need of professional development

The greatest needs for leadership improvement and training, as expressed by school leaders in the countries surveyed, can be grouped into three broad categories of leadership training:

(i) Trust-building and collaboration

Principals from all countries (apart from Tanzania and Botswana) indicated their greatest needs for leadership training in the area labelled *Relations with Parents and the Community*, which includes items such as demonstrating an awareness of school/community needs; demonstrating the use of appropriate and effective techniques for community and parent involvement; developing a two-way communication between the school and community; promoting cooperation with other organisations and businesses from the community so that students' needs are addressed; building relations with the community and parents so that they are encouraged to participate in decision-making within the school; discussing school goals with relevant stakeholders (school board, parents, municipality, etc.); and initiating trust-building activities within the local community. The Commonwealth as a whole also identified this area as the number one priority for improvement and need of training. Furthermore, principals from the participating Commonwealth countries had the greatest mean gap scores with regards to relations with parents and the community.

(ii) Encouraging instructional leadership and human resource development

The second most important factor in which principals expressed a need for further training and improvement is *Instructional Leadership and Human Resource Management*, which includes

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items such as providing instructional resources and materials to support teaching staff in accomplishing instructional goals; systematic monitoring of instructional and managerial processes to ensure that programme activities are related to programme outcomes; effective integration of all special programmes with the regular programme; encouraging the implementation of teaching methods where a 'higher-order form of learning' is facilitated; promoting the interconnection of learning experiences in the school with out-of-school experiences; developing instructional goals that can be translated easily into concrete, operational objectives; observing teachers and providing clear and accurate evalutations that represent their performance; providing clear expectations for staff performance regarding instructional strategies, classroom management and communication with the public; providing sound recommendations relative to personnel placement, transfer, retention and dismissal; and giving clear outlines as to the key roles and core activities of the staff.

The principals from the participating Commonwealth countries had the second and third greatest mean gap scores in the areas of *Professional Growth and Recognition of Staff* and *Instructional Leadership and Human Resource Management*.

Moreover, promoting the interconnection of learning experiences in the school with those followed outside the school was a main concern in all countries. To this effect, principals need to build closer ties between what is happening in the school and what is happening in the outside (real) world, so that learning becomes more meaningful to students. In short, principals want to learn how to make sure that the learning that takes place at the school site has relevance with the real world.

(iii) Initiating school improvement and development

With regards to Student Management and School Climate and School Improvement, these two areas scored lower in their need for improvement in almost all seven countries in this report and certainly in the Commonwealth composite ranking. This does not mean that these areas are not important for school principals but that (probably) they consitute a lower priority for them when compared to other leadership domains.

The results of the project show that the areas requiring the greatest need for leadership improvement and training are as follows:

(i) Trust-building and collaboration

Relations with Parents and the Community

- Promotion of cooperation with other organisations and businesses from the community so that students' needs are addressed.
- Initiation of trust-building activities within the local community.

(ii) Encouraging instructional leadership and human resource development

Instructional Leadership and Human Resource Management

- Effective integration of all special programmes with the regular programme.
- Systematic monitoring of instructional and managerial processes to ensure that programme activities are related to programme outcomes.

- Promotion of the interconnection of learning experiences in the school with those followed outside school.

- Articulation of sound recommendations relative to personnel placement, transfer, retention and dismissal.

Professional Growth and Recognition of Staff

- Provision that refresher course activities of teachers are in accordance with the teaching goals of the school.

- Provision of rewards for teachers who make special contributions to the school.

(iii) Initiating school improvement and development

School climate and School Improvement

- Application of research findings to facilitate school improvement.

Administration and Fiscal/Facilities Management

- Development of budgets based on documented programme needs, estimated enrolment, personnel and other fiscal needs.

Student Management

- Provision of opportunities allowing students to participate actively in school management issues.

It becomes obvious from the above analyses that there needs to be more focus on the three areas of: Instructional Leadership and Human Resource Management; Relations with Parents and the Community; and Professional Growth and Recognition of Staff.

There also appears to be a more country and/or context-specific need for training in the areas of Administration and Fiscal/Facilities Management; Student Management; and School Climate and School Improvement. Apparently, these areas are more context dependent, based on the degree and level of centralisation/decentralisation of the educational system of a specific country, as well as on the accountability and evaluation mechanisms already in place and the ability of parents to choose schools for their children.

Recommendations for future action

So how do we move forward? And in what ways and at what pace? In the following section, we outline where we need to go from here, as well as what it means for the new training programmes and materials that need to be produced.

(i) Contextual factors of school leadership in selected Commonwealth countries

The introduction of instruments of educational governance (in particular, the strong emphasis on decentralisation by devolution) will mean that far-reaching changes are imposed on an established school system and its main change agents – the school leaders. The concept of a more decentralised education system calls for a rethinking of the ways in which the education system is managed at the national, intra-national, regional, local and the single school level. Therefore, schools and their leaders will be faced with new challenges and responsibilities, but they should also, ideally, have more room for individual manoeuvre and have more possibilities to shape and structure their work as they see fit.

The new changes and responsibilities will result in a new professional role for school leaders and, associated with this, a wider array of school leadership functions that call for a wider set of skills in order to fulfil these new functions successfully. Teachers and school principals will play a key role here, as they have already provided us with their views through the Commonwealth Secretariat Needs Assessment Study. The next step forward entails fostering the acceptance of the new roles and functions by answering questions such as:

- Do these new functions strengthen my role as a school leader by refining it?

- Do they help me gain more professional expertise?

- Are the local authorities ready for their new role and can they be trusted?

In any case, for these new roles and functions to be put into practice, two key steps have to be followed:

1. In order to increase the level of acceptance of these new functions and roles, school leaders should be told which of the 'old' functions can be 'reworked' under the new conditions (alternative thinking). If not, school leaders would consider the new tasks an additional workload and burden, which could lead to avoidance, rejection and negativity.

2. School leaders and teachers have to be provided with information, guidance, in-service training and advice as needed. However, it is not only a question of the necessary resources and skills being made available on a timely basis. Rather that the training and capacity-building for these new roles, responsibilities and functions take place both at the local administrative level as well as at the system level.

(ii) The need for professional development among school principals

The nature of the intervention should be in the form of systematic in-service and/or pre-service programmes that can be scheduled and carried out in accordance to the needs as expressed by the school leaders. Further, the necessary skills should be developed on a sound and broad basis (core), as well as on a more specific/advanced basis in order to guarantee their acceptance and effective use across the different contextual situations of the Commonwealth countries. Finally, the training should focus on managerial and leadership tasks, and should include school leaders and administrators at the local level (ideally they should be taught together). This training would help to foster the understanding of the new roles and prepare (as well as sensitise) both groups of stakeholders for any potential sources of conflicts or gains.

The programme structure should be needs-oriented and developmental in nature. More specifically, the following is a more analytical strand for the four development stages of school leaders, according to our Pashiardis-Brauckmann guiding framework (see Figure 1, right column):

1. **Absolute beginners (training before assuming leadership role):** The assumption here is that school leaders are not aware of the new/wider array of functions and roles of school principals as a result of changes at the system level. Therefore, the learning goals are primarily to make them familiar with

the concept of principals as managers and leaders and the respective fields of activities, and also how to structure the main tasks regarding their new roles and set of activities. As a consequence, the leadership styles and respective activities that should be taught are composed of all five leadership domains (Instructional, Participative, Structuring, Entrepreneurial and Personnel Development) and their respective activities (Brauckmann & Pashiardis, 2009).

2. **Freshmen/the survival stage:** Again, the assumption here is that school leaders are knowledgeable about the expectations in terms of new roles and functions, but are struggling with the daily activities of running the school. They are insecure about how and if they can meet those newly set expectations. Therefore, the main learning goals are aimed at structuring and planning daily and weekly activities and on becoming a manager with a core of technical skills, which creates the essential base for successful planning and organising a school's routine. In this stage, the main leadership activities to be taught revolve around the Structuring Leadership Style.

3. **Seniors/the change agents at the individual school level:** Once they have developed and changed in a professional way, school leaders want to have an impact on the organisation and its staff. They want to initiate changes. They focus on school development activities (including staff development, school programmes, building up a vision and a mission); they want to inspire and motivate their staff in terms of initiating the pedagogical quality management process, form alliances and break away from the daily routines; and they want to look beyond the borders of the school. Thus, the learning goals include leading by example, conflict management, human resource development, staff development, vision and mission-building, and networking. The main leadership styles and respective activities to be taught consist of the Entrepreneurial style, the Instructional style and the Human Resources Development style.

4. **Experts/the change agents at the system level:** By this stage, school leaders have changed the school and have become well-versed leaders; now they are willing and able to have an impact on other schools and their school managers, as well as on the education system as a whole. The main learning goals now are to become a trainer of school principals and a leader of leaders. The subjects to be taught consist of all of the aforementioned, as well as how to approach and teach adult learners in a life-long learning setting (adult learning theories and life-long learning).

Conclusion

When preparing these school leader training programmes, it should be borne in mind that all 46 items in the instrument were considered to be very important for the effective operation of the schools, since responding school leaders indicated that each one of these items should be present (with a mean of about 3.80 or more in most cases, on the scale from 1 to 5) in an effective school. Furthermore, the expressed need for leadership training and improvement for school principals around the Commonwealth seem to be highly contextualised and, therefore, training should be

region and country specific, depending on the degree and level of (1) centralisation/decentralisation of the educational system of a specific country; (2) the accountability and evaluation mechanisms in place; and (3) the ability of parents to choose schools for their children. Moreover, special attention should be placed on the clusters of countries that evolved through our analyses.

Finally, more research concerning the needs of educational leaders within a specific cultural context is definitely necessary if we are to prepare school leaders in the best possible way. This kind of research should be intensive, diagnostic and developmental in nature, in order to predict the needs and develop new approaches to educational leadership. It should also be critical and evaluative so that existing theories can be put under scrutiny and functional ideas and practices can become operational.

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 this report, the Commonwealth could use the findings as the basis for creating a Pan-Commonwealth qualification for school leaders, using both traditional methods as well as open and distance methods of delivery. In closing, we would argue that 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'. Finally, as one of the teacher union representatives in Tanzania very eloquently said, 'Not every tall black guy is a Maasai', meaning that not everyone who currently holds the position of a school principal is necessarily a school leader.

References

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