

# School leadership still matters

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In the current global education environment, where various pressures and external challenges to perform better have been identified, there is increasing recognition of the importance of school leadership in supporting change and providing for educational quality. As a result, the various stakeholders have increased their expectations of school leaders', demanding higher academic results and performance standards (Weindling and Dimmock, 2006).

In this context, it is important to re-orient the role of the school leader and identify the forms of leadership actions, behaviours and practices that influence the main purpose of a school's mission, that of enhancing student learning. From such a re-orientation, specific areas for professional development can be identified for school leaders, as the work by a number of researchers supports the belief that principals usually exercise a measurable, though indirect, effect on school effectiveness and student achievement (Brauckmann and Pashiardis, 2011; Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005; Kythreotis, Pashiardis and Kyriakides, 2010; Pashiardis, 1998).

### Leadership Improvement for Student Achievement (LISA) study

Based on the existing literature on school leadership, it is possible to discern the various leadership practices and behaviours that are deemed critical for raising student outcomes, either directly or indirectly. These practices and behaviours were used to formulate the Leadership Improvement for Student Achievement (LISA) theoretical framework, which the LISA study (funded by the European Union) employed as its main point of reference. The overall purpose of the study was to explore how school leadership, directly or indirectly, affects student achievement at the lower secondary level of education (Gymnasium). This aim was also pursued through the adoption of a comparative approach in order to uncover the leadership differences within different educational systems. Therefore, we devised a common framework that would act as a reference base for the comparative aspect of our project.

In this study, leadership was treated as a multi-level construct which may affect school and student variables, but which is also likely to be influenced by contextual variables. The seven countries that participated in the project were England, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Slovenia and the Netherlands.

#### Styles of leadership

The framework comprises five types of leadership styles that school principals are likely to employ in their work. In our case, a

leadership style is defined as 'the nexus of all those behaviours and practices that school principals use in order to influence the behaviour of others' (Pashiardis, 2004). The five types of leadership styles are distinguished as follows:

1. Instructional Style
2. Structuring Style
3. Participative Style
4. Entrepreneurial Style
5. Personnel Development Style

Each leadership style consists of specific behaviours, actions or practices that are likely to be exhibited by school principals (Pashiardis and Brauckmann, 2008; Brauckmann and Pashiardis, 2011). Below is a more detailed examination of these leadership styles.

1. **The Instructional Style** – has a strong focus on the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning. Specifically, it entails the practices of defining and enabling the achievement of the instructional objectives, setting high expectations, monitoring and evaluating students and teachers, and stimulating instructional innovation.
2. **The Structuring Style** – concerns the aspects of providing direction and co-ordination to the school unit, and includes clarifying the vision and mission of the school, establishing and following clear rules, dividing tasks and responsibilities among staff, enabling restructuring and taking risks, and managing facilities in an effective manner.
3. **The Participative Style** – adopts a participative approach to formal and informal decision-making, fostering staff co-operation, brokering and mediating conflicting situations, and promoting staff commitment.
4. **The Entrepreneurial Style** – comprises the practices of involving the parents and other external actors in the school processes, acquiring resources for the smooth running of the school, building coalitions with external agents, and engaging in a market approach to leadership.
5. **The Personnel Development Style** – according to Pashiardis and Brauckmann (2008), this style is employed by effective school leaders in their leadership practices and behaviours. This style involves effective teacher recruitment, the assessment of the teachers' personal and professional needs, the provision of training opportunities, enhancement of their self-efficacy, and the provision of recognition and rewards for exemplary performance.

### The effect of external variables on leadership styles

The framework acknowledges that school leaders do not operate in a vacuum. On the contrary, their actions greatly depend on their perceptions of the particular context in which they work; in other words, how they (the school leaders) interpret the external environment and legal framework that relate to their practices. The context, as we define it, is divided into two main levels:

1. System level variables – which include patterns of centralisation/decentralisation as well as patterns of evaluation and accountability arrangements in each individual country.
2. School level variables – which consist of variables pertaining to the characteristics of the school as well as demographic information.

Furthermore, we were interested in investigating through which intermediate climate variables school leaders affect the final student outcomes. Some of the most prominent mediating variables include: a learning and orderly climate; personal achievement orientation; evaluation and feedback practices; teachers' job satisfaction and commitment to the school; teacher-student interactions; students' opportunity to learn; explicit teaching strategies; and parental involvement. These variables, which operate at the school level, are believed to be influenced by the five leadership styles and in turn to affect school outcomes. In short, the variables mediate the impact of leadership styles on student achievement.

Finally, the framework presents in detail the dependent variables. These variables involve both student and school leader outcomes. With regards to student outcomes, we focused on achievement in basic competences together with attitudes towards life-long learning and citizenship. A series of statistical analyses were carried out to find out whether our data from the LISA project supported this theoretical framework.

Our results showed that in five out of the seven LISA countries, the Entrepreneurial Style surfaced as the most predominant leadership style, with the Structuring Style coming second. More variation was evident across the participating countries with regards to the other three leadership styles. The general trend towards the Entrepreneurial Style could be interpreted as one strategic approach (among others) in response to potential budget cuts or generally limited resources in terms of money, time and personnel. The predominance of this style could also be seen as a strategic build-up of support in order to create new support systems that were originally situated at other governance levels. What we are seeing from the findings, therefore, are the efforts of school leaders to create their own support systems as state-supported systems become fewer and scarcer.

The general trend towards the Structuring style of leadership could be regarded as a response by an institution to the expanded roles and responsibilities of the school. In short, school leaders are trying to provide a clearer division of tasks and responsibilities among school personnel, thus hoping to turn the school into a more productive organisation with less conflict arising from 'fuzzy' or grey areas of responsibilities and duties. Persons within the schools (teachers, students, parents) need to have more clarity of roles and visions. This can be established through the Structuring style of leadership.

With the Entrepreneurial and Structuring styles perceived as the predominant leadership styles, this could be further interpreted as an increased level of awareness with regards to the expanded responsibility of the individual school in our times. Moreover, these

two styles acting together could be seen as further stimulation of the school development and improvement process by creating a community of shared responsibility between the internal and external stakeholders of the school.

### Conclusion

What is becoming increasingly more evident is that there is no best mix of leadership styles for all school leaders. School leadership is highly contextualised, not only at the system level but also (and particularly) at the school level. Whether a school is rural or urban, high or low performing, a combination of all the five leadership styles is needed. More of one style may assume less of another. It is essential that providers of professional development and in-service training for school leaders bear these results in mind when designing professional development activities for school leaders. It is probably beneficial, too, for schools around the Commonwealth to begin thinking how this kind of in-service training relates to the five core leadership styles, taking into account their particular local and cultural environment.

### Endnote

- <sup>1</sup> We use the term school leader as a synonym and substitute for the terms 'school principal' and 'head teacher', which are used interchangeably.

### References

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