South Australian State School Leaders Association
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What we know from studying successful school leaders

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Intention

- Describe a major study of successful school leaders

- Highlight some important ideas arising from this.

- Describe a model that encapsulates the knowledge gained – so far.

- Highlight some of the false promises in leadership research.

The International Successful School Principalship Project

Begun in 2002 with seven countries, now more than 20 countries, and more than 100 case studies.

Interviews with principals, teachers, school board members, students, parents - What are the characteristics of successful principals leading successful schools?

Four books, seven special journal issues, more than 100 refereed journal papers. Most recent book:

Day, C. & Gurr, D. (Eds) (2014) *Leading Schools Successfully: Stories from the field* (London: Routledge).

The International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) is the most comprehensive and coherent international comparative study of the principalship ever undertaken.

Professor Brian Caldwell

Caldwell, B.J. (2014) Forward, in C. Day & D. Gurr (Eds) (2014) *Leading Schools Successfully: Stories from the field* (London: Routledge), pp. xxi-xxii.

Common protocols

Selection

Evidence of student achievement beyond expectations on state or national tests, where this evidence exists.

Principals' exemplary reputations in the community and/or school system. This could be gained through consultation with system personnel or other principals, school inspection reports, and so forth.

Other indicators of success that are more context-specific, such as the overall reputation of the school, awards for exemplary programs, etc.

Multiple Perspective Case studies

Individual interviews with the principal, senior staff and school board members.

Group interviews with teachers, parents and students

Analysis of appropriate documents.

Observation of the work of principals and the functioning of their schools.

Principal and teacher surveys.

Some of the big ideas from the ISSPP

Day, C. & Gurr, D. (Eds) (2014) *Leading Schools Successfully: Stories from the field* (London: Routledge).

Gurr, D. (2015) A Model of Successful School Leadership from the International Successful School Principalship Project, *Societies, 5*(1), pp. 136-150. doi:10.3390/soc5010136
 From a special issue on 'How school leadership influences student learning', edited by Leithwood and Sun. Open access journal available at: www.mdpi.com/journal/societies

High and reasonable expectations for all.

These high expectations are manifest at both personal and collective levels; they are high yet reasonable, and constantly demonstrated and reinforced in the practice of the principals. The expectations are also individualised and very much about helping individuals to achieve their best, rather then focussed on meeting external accountability demands.

Pragmatic/active leadership approach

No single model of leadership satisfactorily captures what successful principals do.

Not transformational or instructional leadership, but transformational and instructional leadership

In essence, these principals develop approaches to leadership which enable them to lead a school community successfully; they are less concerned with the academic debates that rage about the impact of various leadership styles.

Leadership distribution

For these successful school leaders, distributed leadership is almost assumed as they will openly say that the success of their school is due to the leadership of many, and they genuinely value the contribution of teachers, parent and students.

Core leadership practices

Setting direction, developing people, leading change and improving teaching and learning.

Plus

Use of strategic problem solving.

Articulating a set of core ethical values.

Building trust and being visible in the school.

Building a safe and secure environment.

Coalition building.

Promotion of equity, care and achievement.

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Heroic leadership

In many cases there is evidence of heroic leadership, in, for example, the way principals challenge the status quo, fight for the best opportunities for their students, and have a positive and empowering view of what is possible for a school community, whatever the circumstances. But it is heroic leadership that is inclusive, and which we describe as **post-heroic**.

Capacity development

Successful school leaders are people centred. They obviously get enormous satisfaction from seeing students develop, but they are also concerned to develop the adults in a school community, and core to this is their interest and ability in building the capacity of teaching and non-teaching staff to be better at what they do.

Trust and respect

A standout characteristic of the principals is the degree to which they are respected and trusted by their school communities.

Acting with integrity and being transparent about their values, beliefs and actions, modelling good practice, being careful to ensure fairness in how they deal with people, involving many in decision making.

Continuous learning

Whilst some had early leadership opportunities, their success as a principal was generally crafted through a blend of on-the-job learning, formal and informal professional learning, mentoring or sponsorship by significant others, and some serendipity in the pathways to leadership. All the principals were restless folk, seeking new ideas, new ways to do things, new opportunities for their schools, and so they were always developing as professionals.

Personal resources

There are many personal qualities, beliefs and values that help principals be successful leaders.

Acumen, optimism, persistence, trust, tolerance, empathy, alertness, curiosity, resilience, benevolence, honesty, openness, respectfulness, and humbleness.

Above all they are driven by the desire to provide the best educational environment they can for all students.

Context sensitivity

Successful school leadership is context sensitive, but it is not context driven. Using a range of common leadership practices that seem to promote success in most contexts, successful school leaders fine tune their responses to the context and culture in which they lead to optimise school success.

Sustaining success

Factors which seemed to be important for principals to sustain their success include:

- actively engaging with others to arrive at a consensus about what a school should do
- personal qualities and beliefs such as resilience, commitment to making a difference, and engaging the school and wider community
- balancing competing discourses
- utilising both transformational and instructional leadership practices
- continuing their own professional learning
- managing accountability expectations
- positive attitude to change

Question pause

A Model of Successful School Leadership

School vision and mission, culture, structures, people and processes
Engaging stakeholders
High expectations

WHY *HOW* *WHAT*

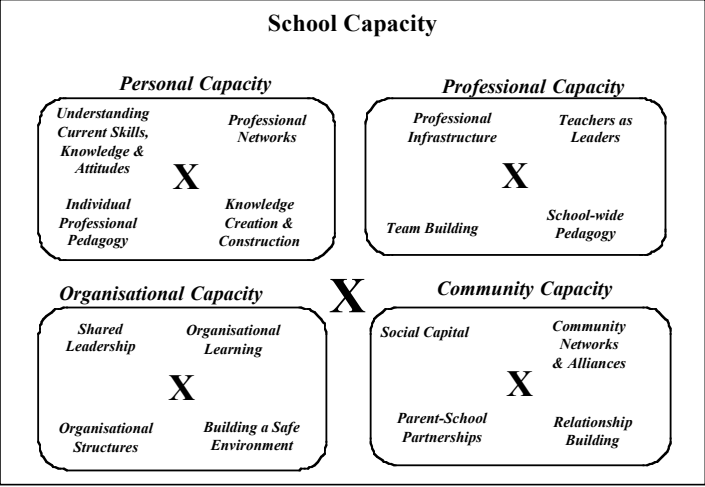**Level 3 Impact – Context** ⟷ **Level 2 Impact – Leadership** ⟷ **Level 1 Impact – Teaching & Learning** ⟷ **Outcomes**

The School Leader
Qualities, characteristics, competencies, values and beliefs, attitude to change, creative management of competing values, experience, professional learning, visibility, trust, tenure in school, role clarity.

Engaging with and influencing contextual factors such as:
Within school – school type, school size, community educational advantage, composition of student body, resources.
Outside of school – governmental policies, systemic policies, community expectations, school accountability systems, country goals, societal changes (technical, economic, educational, demographic, philosophical).
Family - educational culture and social capital

School Capacity

Personal Capacity
Understanding Current Skills, Knowledge & Attitudes   Professional Networks
X
Individual Professional Pedagogy   Knowledge Creation & Construction

Professional Capacity
Professional Infrastructure   Teachers as Leaders
X
Team Building   School-wide Pedagogy

Organisational Capacity
Shared Leadership   Organisational Learning
X
Organisational Structures   Building a Safe Environment

X

Community Capacity
Social Capital   Community Networks & Alliances
X
Parent-School Partnerships   Relationship Building

Teaching & Learning
Curriculum
Pedagogy
Assessment
Reporting
Student involvement in leaning
Learning technologies
Learning spaces

Student Outcomes
Academic – attainment and progress as shown through formal testing, teacher judgement, prizes, and so forth.
Extra and co-curricular - participation and achievement in programs additional to those considered core
Personal – including social development, sense of empowerment, self-identity, spiritual development, citizenship, and lifelong learning.

School outcomes
School success and reputation
Teacher quality
School conditions – the quality of the learning environment

Networks, collaborations & partnerships

Portfolio leadership drawing on a range of theories/views
e.g. Transformational & instructional leadership

Accountability, evaluation and change through evidence based monitoring and critical reflection on performance

Gurr, D. (2015) A Model of Successful School Leadership from the International Successful School Principalship Project, *Societies, 5*(1), pp. 136-150. Free to access. Please note that this model is a development of a model that Lawrie Drysdale, Bill Mulford and I constructed some years earlier.

The school. Engaging stakeholders. High expectations

Why	**How**		**What**

Level 3   **Level 2**   **Level 1**   **Outcomes**

Context   **Leadership**   **Teaching & Learning**

The school leader

Engaging with and influencing contextual factors

School Capacity
Personal
Professional
Organisational
Community

Curriculum
Pedagogy
Assessment
Reporting
Student involvement in leaning
Learning technologies
Learning spaces

Student Outcomes
Academic
Extra and co-curricular
Personal

Networks, collaborations & partnerships

Portfolio leadership

School outcomes
Reputation, teacher quality, school conditions

Accountability, evaluation and change, evidence based monitoring and critical reflection

False promises

There is a lot of good leadership research to inform your practice. But you need to be critical consumers of these ideas and so there are some big ideas that need some caution.

False promises

- **Instructional over transformational leadership** - The Power of 'And': Transformational **AND** instructional leadership.
- **The one size fits all leadership model.** You need to develop your own view of leadership, drawing upon the many good ideas that are available.
- **Teacher leadership** – not everyone wants to be a leader in the sense I have described and teacher leadership is a confused concept. But, leadership of the type I have described today is applicable to anyone in a defined leadership role, albeit within the constraints of the role.
- **Leadership as science** – it is possibly more art than science, because leadership is a complex human endeavour
- **The magic of numbers** – quantitative research is very valuable but only tells part of a story.

Questions

Contact Details

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