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Editorial Note

Welcome to the second issue for 2015, with the international orientation of the journal clearly illustrated by our contributing authors located in Canada, China, Israel, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Sweden, the UK and the USA.

A number of articles in this issue focus on school leaders. In the first contribution, Katina Pollock, Elizabeth Murakami and Donna Swapp explore the perceptions of successful school administrators in their roles within the changing context of schooling in Ontario, Canada and the states of Arizona and New York in the USA. This research considers district and campus administrators’ work experience and contemporary challenges related to province- or state-specific expectations, school improvement issues, resource distribution and accountability.

Whilst many may feel that there are a lot of similarities between the Canadian and US education systems, this article helps to show that public schooling is very different in these two countries and goes to demonstrate just how different public education can be, particularly in relation to school principals and what they do.

The findings in the study indicate that the work of principals is changing. Many of these changes are not explicit. Whilst principals are still ‘doing’ what they have always been expected to do (create visions, build relationships with numerous stakeholders, support organisational growth, improve student success, and so on), how they go about fulfilling expectations has changed. For example, advances in information and communication technology have expanded the ways in which principals are able to share information and interact with various stakeholders. A second change in principals’ work has been an expansion in their repertoire of roles. Principals are no longer expected to simply be managers of the school building, nor to focus on the demanding role of instructional leader. They are now expected to take on additional roles (as health and safety officers and legal experts, for example) because their work context – and/or in some cases, legislation – demands that they do so. This work intensification has occurred not only in terms of increased expectations, roles and tasks, but also the rate at which principals are expected to engage in and carry out these tasks. As the authors point out, ‘[o]ne wonders, what will be the breaking point?’

The authors argue that the ‘knowledge (gained through this study) can be useful to inform jurisdictional policies that will help shape the role of the principal into a work arrangement that is realistic, manageable and organized for success’. We truly agree with this. The pressure on school leaders is such that it is leading to more stress (Bottery, Ngai, Wong & Wong 2008) and fewer and fewer educators aspiring to leadership positions (Smith 2011). And, paradoxically, whilst operating in an accountability-driven arena, we want our school leaders to be more humane and caring, as other articles in this issue emphasise.

The article by Pamela Angelle, Helene Arlestig and Katarina Norberg tackles the area of social justice, an area currently being given visibility through various international conferences (such as the AERA conference held in April 2015 in Chicago, and the more recent BELMAS conference held in July 2015 in Reading in the UK), and now more so in the press as a result of the immigration issues
that are impacting so many European countries. This qualitative study examines the meaning of social justice as perceived by four school principals, two in Sweden and two in the USA. Whilst the study uncovers many similarities in the practices and behaviours of the four principals at the meso and micro levels, significant differences were found at the macro level. While the Swedish principals feel comfortable and empowered in their work, the US principals expressed isolation and that their passion for social justice was subsumed by the requirements of accountability mandates.

Chen and Mitchell present us with a comparative study of two schools, one in Beijing and the other in Ontario, Canada. The purpose of this research was to compare and contrast the implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in Chinese and Canadian schools. A qualitative design was used to collect data from two school principals in each location. Data analysis revealed that the root of the differences between PLCs in Beijing and Ontario was the different educational systems, as well as the test systems. The Chinese principals had a previously established system for organizing time and resources, whereas the Canadian schools lacked a similar system. Moreover, standardized tests played different roles in the two countries. The Beijing principals regarded such tests as the important purpose of education, whereas the Ontario principals saw them as a tool rather than a primary purpose. These two differences influenced the principals’ beliefs, attitudes, strategies and practices.

What we have found most interesting, and we feel ought to be given more prominence in our research, are the interactions between a PLC and the educational culture into which it is introduced. The results of this study show that in top-down and test-oriented structures – which are believed to be barriers to developing educators’ professional capacity – a PLC can, to some extent, both reinforce an existing hierarchical system and foster changes. In the narratives of the Beijing principals, the PLCs were applied in Teaching Research Groups and improved the effectiveness and efficiency of activities. In the narratives of the Ontario principals, the PLCs instead guided principals to distribute their power to staff members and motivated teachers’ spontaneous learning and research. These results show that principals can successfully confront the challenges of their existing system with the practices of a PLC. It is clear that the PLCs positively influenced the principals in both Beijing and Ontario, which proves their applicability in diverse educational backgrounds. Ultimately, the challenge is to explore the impact that the PLC model has on the educators involved, as well as on the students as beneficiaries of the engagements taking place. What are the results that accrue from such a model? What are the prices we have to pay when using the same model for opposing ends? Does the end justify the means?

Howard Youngs and Carol Cardno take us through an evaluation of a professional development programme for experienced school principals in New Zealand. The introduction of this programme was part of a wider Government of New Zealand and Ministry of Education strategy to strengthen professional leadership in schools. This programme was a priority in the Ministry of Education’s 2009-2010 Professional Leadership Plan, which aspired to create a cohesive approach to leadership development, from middle leadership through to the different stages of a school principal’s career. Evaluation occurred at three levels and in three phases. Levels one and two were designed to gather data related to the overall national findings, and level three was designed in parallel to provide insights into what was occurring with a selection of regional providers. The overall perceptions of principals were collected through questionnaires at level one; the overall perceptions of regional provider co-ordinators were collected through interviews at level two, complemented with a document analysis of espoused provider programmes. The evaluation was spread over three
phases: the provider programme initiation phase, an expected programme delivery mid-point phase and a programme end-point phase.

Overall, the findings point to the success of delivery modes with small cohorts and that include clarity of expectations, timely initiation, the inclusion of internal and external coaching/mentoring partnerships, and context-related activities around school improvement.

In the next article, Izhar Oplatka explores the ‘promotion of emotions’ as a means to engage with students facing hardships. The basis for this study was a series of semi-structured interviews with a small group of students. The students help us to appreciate the concept of care in teaching, often the missing dimension in our educational reform discourse, but one that is more and more important given the drive for performativity and managerialism. As people disengage, we realise how important it is to focus on the human dimension as we engage not only with students but also with colleagues. This article provides a number of insights that can help us to review our own practices, whether as classroom/subject teachers or as school leaders.

Tony Bush and colleagues report on a study undertaken in Malaysia and the Philippines concerning master teachers. In a context in which schools in general, and teachers in particular, are held accountable for the academic performance of students, the role of master teachers and teacher leadership requires more research. Whilst this is an introductory study undertaken in an under-researched context, it helps us to realise that the role of master teacher – a position that is shrouded by what the authors describe as ‘the plethora of additional administrative duties’ that condition what they can actually achieve – is acknowledged and appreciated in these two countries.

This study shows how a particular concept – in this case, that of master teachers – takes on different hues as posts are interpreted to ‘satisfy’ particular philosophies, policies and practices that education authorities may wish to implement. Some interesting ideas related to beliefs versus practices help to show what a small world we are living in, and how so many countries experience the same fate when following centralised systems.

In the final article, also from Canada, Louis Volante presents a critique of an international achievement testing programme, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is increasingly being utilised as a policy instrument to facilitate large-scale educational reforms. PISA – which, among all such programmes, garners the most attention in policy spheres – has drawn criticism and provoked debate over its expanding role in educational governance issues. Critics have argued that it is damaging education worldwide by escalating standardized testing, emphasizing a narrow range of measurable foci in education, and shifting educational policies to find short-term fixes designed to help a country climb the rankings. This article discusses the convergence debate and the continuum of policy responses that have been associated with the PISA triennial survey. Two distinct educational jurisdictions – Germany and Japan – are offered as cases that exemplify highly reactive policy contexts. The article concludes by examining the associated link between PISA, economic prosperity and the emergence of transnational governance.

Although Shanghai-China and other Asian contexts such as Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea have quickly replaced Finland as the new reference societies for educational system research and policy borrowing, Volante argues that ‘extrapolating lessons from one education jurisdiction to another is mediated by cultural differences and the socio-political forces that are prevalent during particular historical periods’. He goes on to note that ‘[f]uture studies on the impact of PISA on education governance must juxtapose educational issues against the complex interplay of political, economic and social issues’. We fully agree, noting that studies that look
into the impact such initiatives have on different stakeholders are essential given the drive for performativity at all costs.

Christopher Bezzina, Jeremy Kedian and Paul Miller
Interim Editors, International Studies in Educational Administration

References
The Work of School Leaders: North American Similarities, Local Differences

Katina Pollock, Elizabeth Murakami and Donna H. Swapp

Abstract: This study explores the perceptions of successful school administrators in their roles within the changing context of schooling in Ontario, Canada, and the US states of Arizona and New York. This research considers district and campus administrators’ work experience and contemporary challenges related to province- or state-specific expectations, school improvement issues, resource distribution and accountability. Focus groups of practicing principals reflected the ways in which school leadership was defined and enacted across borders, providing significant commonalities within the international perspectives of the participants, as well as context-specific differences in the interpretation of their perspectives.

The use of public education as a lever to improve economic stability and competition in the global economic market means that education systems are in a constant state of reform and/or improvement. School administrators are expected to play an influential role in this reform (Kersten & Ballenger 2012). There has been a targeted effort to recruit, train and retain candidates to succeed in the demanding roles required of principals today. In addition, the knowledge base used to reform schools and prepare school administrators is increasingly informed by practices associated with globalisation and advances in information communication technology (ICT) that have dissolved national boundaries (Pollock & Winton 2011). Along with cross-border policy borrowing and knowledge mobilisation to inform school reform and prepare school administrators comes increased support for, and engagement in, cross-national comparative research in educational leadership (Pollock & Murakami 2014).

While most studies compare trends reported through administrators’ responses to interviews and questionnaires about their work, few studies are structured around data collection that includes administrators working in different contexts sharing their experiences simultaneously. Often, comparative research in education leadership includes samples of administrators from different regions responding to similar protocols, with the actual comparisons conducted afterwards in a removed data analysis process by academic researchers (e.g., Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson & Ylimaki 2007; Hoog, Johansson & Olofsson 2005; Gurr & Drysdale 2008). This article explores the perceptions of school administrators’ work within the changing educational contexts of Ontario, Canada, and the states of Arizona and New York in the USA. Specifically, using focus groups of principals from two US states and one Canadian province, this study employs a dialogic inquiry to capture the comparative differences and similarities experienced by principals dealing with...
similar school issues, such as changing financial contexts, increasingly diverse student populations, increased expectations for school leaders, and decreased power and decision-making processes.

This research considers the nature of district and campus school administrators’ roles and contemporary challenges, including issues such as public expectations, school improvement issues, resource distribution and accountability. School administrators in this study include district/province administrators and school principals. Using a dialogic inquiry approach (Wells 2000; Kotsopoulos 2010) to examine the experiences of administrators, we asked: ‘How do successful school administrators perceive their role in contemporary times?’

Significant to this study is recognizing that even when school administrators are successful in meeting board/district requirements and the needs of campus students, parents and teachers, the nature of their work presents ever-changing demands and challenges affecting their successful leadership. In the next sections, we provide a review of literature that informs us about the work of school administrators in recent decades, a theoretical framework for this study, a description of methods, and a thematic analysis of the perceptions of school administrators’ work within the changing educational contexts of Canada and the USA.

Review of the Literature

The study of school administrators’ work within changing educational contexts has developed through different research approaches. School administrators are oftentimes observed for their influence in managing change (Bogler 2001; Heck & Hallinger 2005). In this review, we consider not only how school administrators impact change, but more specifically, how they are impacted by change. Hargreaves (2005) argues that each change in schools is multidimensional, involving cultural, structural, moral, political and emotional aspects for those involved. School administrators, before further implementation, consider all these aspects with teachers and support staff such as early childhood educators and educational assistants.

School administrators are hard-pressed to make several changes and decisions on a daily basis (Day & Leithwood 2007). Inside schools, administrators are pressured to effectively adopt policies while generating a supportive learning environment. The number of tasks school administrators need to embrace today is similar in Canada and the USA. For example, consider recent studies in Ontario, Canada, that reflect school administrators’ current work environment. Pollock’s (2014a, 2014b) research exemplifies how school administrators are experiencing work intensification. Part of this work intensification comes from a combination of additional tasks and expectations, conducting work differently, and pressure to work within restricted time periods. In terms of additional tasks and expectation, for example, 88.3 per cent of Ontario school administrators indicated they were involved in school-based programs designed to support student mental health (Pollock 2014a). In relation to communication with stakeholders, school administrators indicated that while phone calls accounted for four hours of work per week, on average they spent 11 hours reading and writing emails every week. Lastly, 72 per cent of Ontario school administrators indicated they felt pressured to work long hours, and yet 87 per cent felt as though they never have enough time to complete all of their work (Pollock 2014a).

In the USA, poverty, diversity of programs based on student needs, high accountability systems and unequal funding are challenging issues influencing school administrators’ work (Drysdale, Bennett, Murakami, Johansson & Gurr 2014; Medina, Martinez, Murakami, Rodriguez & Hernandez 2014). In a national report on the characteristics of principals in the USA, Bitterman, Goldring & Gray (2013) reported that public school administrators in the USA spent 58.1 hours a
Public school administrators had an average of 7.2 years of experience in the role. They perceived their major influence as being in the evaluation of teachers (96 per cent), hiring new full-time teachers (85 per cent) and setting discipline (80 per cent). Lashway (2006) espouses that the school principalship has changed dramatically in recent times. Some argue that the culture in which principals have recently found themselves is one of anxiety and fear as a result of the extremely high-stakes accountability system (Darling-Hammond 2004; McGhee & Nelson 2005; McDermott 2007). In terms of expanding roles, school administrators in New York City, for example, find themselves negotiating with supplemental education service providers as a part of a local policy mandate.

Framework

This article is framed around the concept of work. Even though participants were asked to report on how their role had changed, responses tended to refer to work performed on a daily basis. It should be noted that although ‘work’ and ‘role’ are closely connected, they are not exactly the same. A role carries with it an expectation of particular kinds of work; there is no guarantee, however, that a person in a particular role is engaging in the work and behaviours assigned to that role. This has been considered a limitation of role theory – that it possesses an over-determined view of interactions. As Ryan (2007) points out, it is ‘unrealistic to assume, as most role theorists do, that the position that a person occupies will dictate what he or she does’ (p. 344). In this study, no specific role of the school administrator was central, but rather the work carried out by principals within multiple roles was considered. For the purposes of this study, we defined ‘work’ as ‘the practices and actions in which school administrators engage to fulfil their responsibilities as school principals’.

In analysing the data provided by school administrators for this study, it was important to suspend judgement and to contextualise responses. Hofstede (2011) argues that in individualistic societies tasks prevail over relationships, while in collective societies relationships prevail over tasks. This study takes advantage of English as a common language, and of a comfortable proximity between school administrators in Canada and the USA. Nonetheless, we agreed that there were marked differences between individuals and mind frames in each country (e.g. Murakami, Tornsen & Pollock 2014). For example, some argue that the USA is a more individualistic society compared with Canada.

Methodology

This study uses a dialogic inquiry to explore the perceptions of school administrators’ roles within the changing educational contexts of Ontario, Canada, and the US states of New York and Arizona. Georgi & Georgi (2008) highlighted the importance of observing participants within ‘a particular phenomenon, a situation… in which individuals have first-hand experiences that they can describe as they actually took place in their lives’ (p. 28). We perceive the increasing pressure on school administrators as a particular phenomenon in recent decades. To carry out this investigation, we engaged in a dialogic inquiry. Kotsopoulos (2010) defines dialogic inquiry as a method that allows for the examination of how participants appropriate, construct and reconstruct knowledge through expressing their experiences through texts, speech, gestures, conversations and customs.
### Table 1: Characteristics of schools in New York Ontario and Arizona

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic trends</th>
<th>New York</th>
<th>Ontario (Canada)</th>
<th>Arizona</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Three million students in the State of New York attend 4,530 public schools, 1,768 non-public schools, and 248 charters. New York has a representative percentage of English language learners.</td>
<td>Two million school-age children attend public school. Ontario has the second most diverse population of the three jurisdictions: 23% visible minority groups and 2% aboriginal peoples.</td>
<td>One million school-age children attend 230 public school districts, 1,849 public schools and 500 local education agencies (LEAs). The largest ethnic group of students are Hispanic (44%).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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| School governance | Limited federal role in education. Education in New York is primarily a state and local responsibility. | Limited federal role in education. Schooling in Canada falls under provincial jurisdiction. Ontario has 72 district school boards across four publicly funded school systems: English, French, English-Catholic, and French-Catholic. | Limited federal role in education. Education in Arizona is primarily a state and local responsibility. |

| Context | Schooling is compulsory for students from kindergarten to secondary. | Schooling is compulsory for students from kindergarten to secondary. | Schooling is compulsory for students from kindergarten to secondary. |

| Accountability | The state’s students have demonstrated high scores in reading and maths. The adoption of a Common Core curriculum and EngageNY materials are reshaping education in the state. | Low stakes, but school-level student achievement test scores are publicly reported and manipulated by non-governmental organisations. | The superintendent at the Arizona Department of Education supervises all aspects of school performance. In 2010 the state revised its accountability system, with an A-F grade reporting system. |

We know that dialogues serve multiple purposes (Pollock & Winton 2011). For this analysis, our understanding of a dialogue is similar to Joshee & Johnson’s (2007) explanation of a policy dialogue as ‘a process through which the parties involved convey their own sense of, position on, and story about an issue’ (p. 5). Joshee & Johnson’s understanding of policy dialogues parallels what we observed in the focus group sessions, specifically in terms of individuals coming to new understandings through listening, questioning, critiquing, discussing points of disagreement and reflecting on their own contexts. Public dialogues that do not inform policy are growing in popularity (Pollock & Winton 2011). We also extend Walker’s (2014) notion that ‘deeper understanding may best flow iteratively through empirically grounded discourse between scholars from “within” a specific culture, and others who can provide an “outsider” perspective’ (p. 4). We argue that deeper practitioner understanding may best flow iteratively through discourses from practitioners within a specific jurisdictional culture, while others can provide an ‘outsider’ perspective.

**The Contexts of Ontario, New York and Arizona**

In an effort to provide context, we include Table 1 to offer a broad comparison of the three jurisdictions included in this study. Specifically, we highlight demographic trends, school governance, context and accountability structures.

In Canada, education remains largely the responsibility of the individual provinces. In Ontario, school boards parallel US school boards, staffed by trustees who are elected. The presence of the province is also strongly felt in the Ontario education system, as the system is very centralised, hierarchical and definitive, as opposed to the state control in the USA.

**Participants**

The participants included a total of 14 school administrators who attended the 10th Annual International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP) conference held in Boston in June 2011 (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Participants addressing the work of school administrators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Grade level</th>
<th>Type of school</th>
<th>Performance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>6 administrators, with 3-25 years of experience</td>
<td>3 Elementary, 2 High School, 1 District coordinator</td>
<td>Urban/rural schools serving 150-2,000 students</td>
<td>From low- to high-performing schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>8 administrators, with 3-12 years of experience</td>
<td>4 Elementary, 1 High School, 1 District coordinator</td>
<td>Urban/suburban schools serving 580-800 students</td>
<td>1 low- and 1 very high-performing school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ISSPP, founded in 2001, is an international educational consortium originally composed of ten countries, now incorporating a total of 20 countries (Canada, China, Denmark, the UK, Norway, Sweden, Tasmania, the USA, Australia, South Africa, Puerto Rico, Kenya, Spain, Mexico, Cyprus, Israel, Turkey, Portugal and New Zealand). ISSPP research focuses on successful leadership among school administrators through case studies and cross-country assessments (Jacobson & Day 2007).
The consortium uncovers and promotes school administrators’ leadership practices at the core of student achievement and overall school reform. During the 2011 ISSPP conference, featured researchers, educators and practitioners across nine different countries and six European, North American and South American universities disseminated and discussed ground-breaking research through seminars, presentations and focus group discussions.

The school administrators who attended the ISSPP Boston conference were selected based on several criteria (Jacobson & Day 2007). They were either (i) widely characterised as an effective leader by their professional peers, (ii) district superintendents responsible for schools identified as having successful school principals according to ISSPP benchmarks, or (iii) identified as a successful school principal based on these ISSPP benchmarks. The ISSPP benchmarks categorise successful principals as those from schools that received a positive review from its state/province or jurisdiction (particularly with regard to school leadership) and have demonstrated improved performance, as indicated through some type of standardised testing, over a period of five years.

**Focus Group Discussions**

School administrators in this study reflected on externally imposed change, and their agency in adapting to new policies and practices. During the conference, focus group sessions, composed of heterogeneous groups from each jurisdiction, were organised to engender current and meaningful knowledge of critical issues regarding school leadership by hearing directly from practising school administrators. The use of focus groups is important when the topic of interest guides the discussion (Morgan 1996) through a structured interview protocol.

Three focus groups were conducted. In each of the focus group discussions, participants were asked to (a) provide background information on their school administrative context; (b) describe their perception of the job as a school/district administrator, including how the job had changed and how they adapted as a result of perceived changes; (c) identify challenges of the job; and (d) offer advice for preparing future administrators. Each focus group was chaired by a superintendent of education, and (non-participating) practitioners, researchers and educational professionals formed a silent audience around the rooms. Focus groups lasted for one hour and were often emotional. At the end of the sessions, summative points were drawn from each group and shared with the entire conference in a larger dialogue.

Three focus group sessions with an average of five practitioners per group are considered for this study. Participants were from Ontario, Arizona and New York, and their experience as a school administrator ranged from three to 25 years.

**Data Analysis**

The data were analysed based on the dialogic exchanges, focusing on predominant themes from the participating practitioners’ responses across the various jurisdictions. These themes emerged from a comparative analysis of the cultural context of each jurisdiction. The ways in which themes converged or differed were carefully considered and highlighted depending on the province or state from which participants reported. In some cases, school administrators reported similar work experiences across the various jurisdictions, such as feelings of inadequate power, authority and decision-making abilities. In other cases, however, differences became apparent. For example, finances influenced school administrators’ work differently depending on the jurisdiction. US school administrators reported attempting to manage fiscal restraint, while Ontario school
administrators’ work has increased as new initiatives have been put into place due to increased provincial spending. In the following section, we report on these themes in more detail.

Findings

It was clear from the participants’ descriptions that they each faced similar issues in their work, but how they dealt with these issues and how the issues played out varied because of differences between the jurisdictions. Five interrelated themes emerged from these focus group discussions: (a) a financial impact on public schooling; (b) increased student diversity; (c) increased accountability; (d) changes in school administrator power; and (e) changing expectations of the school administrator.

Impact of Finances

When principals were asked how their job had changed, the issue of money, budget or finances came up. However, the discussion differed between Ontario, Arizona and New York. For example, public funding in the US comes from federal, state and local funds, with half of these funds originating from local property taxes, creating a large funding gap between wealthy and poor neighbourhoods (Biddle & Berliner 2002). The differences in per pupil funding across states further provides further evidence of this gap, as the aforementioned authors demonstrated, with Arizona students receiving a little over half of the amount given to New York students. All school administrators reported different degrees of budget cuts.

In US states, the reduction in budgets and spending caused principals to engage in creative ways to raise money. Several school administrators described securing services through community organisations for things such as meals, tutoring programmes and afterschool activities, and taking on some of the educational duties and roles within their own school sites. For example, one school administrator from New York identified budget cuts as one of the leading changes that he was confronting, and he described his efforts at strategic planning/allocation as ‘choosing your poison’. He stated: ‘We have to make difficult decisions. I am aware of that, when we have a four million dollar budget cut. It is “choose your poison” at that point, because it seems it’s not always what is best for kids in our community.’ New York leaders, especially, have had to become more creative with their school budgets, making ‘difficult decisions’ to cut learning programmes, services and opportunities that would otherwise have been available to students.

In Ontario, there have been restrictions on budgetary spending since the fallout of the 2008 economic crisis. However, Ontario school administrators described the impact of school funding in a different manner. Overall, the education sector in Ontario has seen a decade or more of increased spending, and while spending has slowed recently, marginal increases are still being experienced as a result of the provincial government’s pledge to ‘protect’ education as it attempts to reduce the provincial deficit. Ontario focus group participants described how the provincial government had invested additional funding in public education, with this translating into an increase in the number and rate of initiatives being introduced in schools. As one Ontario school administrator shared, ‘the good news is money has flowed into education which is great. The challenge is in keeping up with all the money, keeping up with all the initiatives because you can only juggle so many things.’

This additional funding was earmarked for specific initiatives, each of which often included programmes, policies and accountability measures. One Ontario school administrator termed the unintended consequences of this phenomenon as ‘initiativists’, that is, ‘[b]ig agendas that need to be implemented at the school levels’.
The challenge is in keeping up with all the money, keeping up with all the initiatives because you can only juggle so many things and the accountability and the transparency—which makes good sense, because if money is coming, if billions of dollars is being spent on public education at the end of the day, public education better show that it is improved.

In this sense, Ontario school administrators’ work was influenced not by trying to raise money for individual school sites and programmes that are in danger of being cut, as in the US examples, but by trying to manage the numerous initiatives that have funding attached, and doing so in a way that demonstrates improvement in student learning. Overall, the Ontario school administrators seemed to be thankful that there was more money in the coffers for public education in comparison to their counterparts in Arizona and New York.

**Increased Student Diversity**

It was clear that school administrators from all three jurisdictions were dealing with increased student diversity. The notion of student diversity was tied to more than just race/ethnicity and ability, and also included socioeconomic status. When Ravitch (2000) reported on the history of New York City public schools, she recognised that poverty has been one of the biggest challenges facing urban schools in particular. In addition, the teacher workforce in the USA does not reflect the racial/ethnic diversity of students. For example, Bitterman et al.’s (2013) national report shows an overrepresentation of White teachers (82 per cent), and an underrepresentation of African American teachers (7 per cent) and Hispanic teachers (8 per cent); these teachers serve a student population that is 52 per cent White, 16 per cent African American, and 24 per cent Hispanic (Aud, Hussar, Kena, Bianco, Frohlich, Kemp & Tahan 2011).

One New York school administrator indicated that his school has remained predominantly White, but in terms of socioeconomic status, the school services increased from ‘around 28 per cent when [he] started and it was up to 48 per cent. So the dynamics have changed; it used to be considered more a country club type of school but things have changed...’. Another New York school administrator spoke about his school consisting largely of minority students, with around 80 per cent of students on a reduced or free lunch programme. One Arizona school administrator reflected on how the student population has changed over the last ten years in terms of language – her student population consisted of ‘about 76 per cent Hispanic... to about 12 per cent White’ compared to a roughly 50/50 split ten years ago.

School administrators in Ontario experienced differences within their student populations as well. One school administrator described how student populations across Ontario ranged from small rural schools where all students were White and bussed in to extremely multicultural urban regions with more than 30 languages spoken. Ontario also experiences similar demographic patterns to New York State in that while ethnic and racial diversity has grown within the student population, the teacher and principal workforce still remains predominantly white (Ryan, Pollock & Antonelli 2009). Recognition of this disparity in equitable representation is important because race matters (West 1994). And many believe that teachers from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds have much to offer to the entire student population (Ryan et al. 2009). It was clear that the school administrators recognised the importance of inclusion for all students and the unique needs of such diverse student populations, but how that played out was somewhat different in Ontario compared to Arizona and New York.

In New York and Arizona, school administrators appeared to constantly fight against exclusionary policies, or advocate for programming and inclusive practices that could benefit their student
populations. In Ontario, school administrators did not necessarily have to advocate for provincial or district support for inclusive education, but rather were struggling with facilitating changes in culture. In New York specifically, school administrators struggled to meet the needs of all students while in a constant state of budgetary cuts. One school administrator elaborated: ‘The administrators are having to assume a lot more roles now because of budget cuts. Many schools are working without counsellors, without bilingual teachers, proper supervision as far as special minors [children with special needs]….’ According to one Arizona school administrator, budgetary cuts, as well as other kinds of laws and regulations, limited the success of students:

There have been laws passed that ban bilingual education which research shows is the best for those students coming in speaking Spanish or another language. ‘Teach them in their language and then move on to English’ – that’s just not allowed. In Arizona we’ve been asked to be 10/70 which is an anti-immigration law, and so these policies are also pushing on the schools and create friction between the communities that we work with, and the school system. There’s also a history in that area, of schools used as tools for eliminating languages and cultures.

Responses to increased awareness of diverse student populations in Ontario were somewhat different. The 2009 Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy consists of action items for the ministry, the school boards and the schools. None of the Ontario school administrators spoke directly about programmes or support being cut for specific subgroups of the student population, nor did they mention any of the programmes attached to the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. However, one participant described some of the roles of the learning supervisors within her board, which indicated a somewhat different response to diverse student populations as compared to the USA:

As a system principal… I have a team of learning coordinators who work with me at the board office and they provide support to schools on a needs basis. I have a team of 14 literacy coaches within my portfolio… I have an ESL learning coordinator who facilitates the support of English as a second language within our board. I have four French learning coordinators and I have a First Nation Education advisor.

Rather than support being cut, it appeared that for this particular board in Ontario, some resources were available to support diverse student populations. As mentioned earlier, increased programming and support not only come with increased budgets, but also increased accountability.

**Increased Accountability Expectations**

School administrators from all jurisdictions commented on working in education systems that have mandated performance-based accountability systems, some with high stakes and others less so. In the USA, the reauthorisation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, more popularly known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (U.S. Department of Education 2001) has pressured schools to have all students performing at grade level in English and Maths by 2014. New York and Arizona were among the 36 states applying for a waiver of sanctions so they could continue to offer expanded learning time programmes and additional tutoring for students in need of improvement (Ryman 2012). Ontario’s accountability system is not considered to be one of high stakes. However, Ontario school administrators reported feeling pressure from the accountability mechanisms:
My current role has a heightened sense of accountability to the public, and throughout the system. It is always evidence-based, data-driven accountability, but it is very much looking at improving student learning. And I feel that we are focused in our work to improve student learning but it adds to the pressure and the accountability that is placed on the school administrators’ shoulders.

School administrators in New York and Arizona echoed the notion of the drive of various accountability mechanisms as increasingly putting pressure on principals. One New York principal responded: ‘It’s a jungle out there. You know the accountability has also increased over the years. So you’re seeing budget cuts but then you’re expected to do more.’ An Arizona school administrator stated that ‘increased accountability and increased testing, formative and summative evaluations in the school building to make sure the students are on track’ had influenced her role as a school leader because she had to engage in more procedural work, such as record keeping as part of the accountability process.

School administrators expressed a heightened sense of accountability regarding educational decisions and results. The US experience described accountability largely to the state and federal governments, especially through NCLB policies, which drive education decisions because schools must adhere to them if they want to receive funding. School administrators described standardised assessment and performance benchmarks/scores that must be realised and/or maintained in order for schools to be kept open and for teachers and school administrators to keep their jobs. School administrators also pointed out that major decisions regarding the operations of schools were made by the councils, and their task as administrators was to comply.

The Ontario experience spoke largely to accountability to the province, which is responsible for the delivery of education. There is a hierarchical structure of accountability in the Ontario education system. Practising school administrators described the relationship between provincial expectations and school operations, reporting such accountability as being significantly evidence based and data driven. One school administrator commented:

I just wanted to say I became a principal in 2004. From our province there is a strong push to raise standards and close the achievement gaps in Ontario. So from a provincial standpoint that has been a huge focus for a lot of specific kinds of targets for achievement.

Administrators also described increased levels of accountability on the part of school boards. Although the Ontario school administrators described a strong sense of accountability, the overall climate regarding the delivery of education seems more potent, desperate and troubled in the USA.

**Changes in Principal Power and Decision-making**

All school administrators agreed that the ways in which they went about making decisions and what they actually did in the day-to-day execution of their work had changed. One Ontario school administrator shared: ‘When I was first a principal, by and large [when] the principal said something, it happened; not so much anymore.’ Increased centralisation of education and the concomitant reduction of decision-making authority for school administrators seemed to affect school principals’ work. However, the degree to which such work had changed varied depending on the jurisdiction. In the USA, school-based planning and shared decision-making are articulated in regulations at the state level. In New York, each district develops a plan for the participation of teachers and parents with school board members in shared decision-making (NYSED no date). In Arizona, shared decision-making is a measurement in evaluating the effectiveness of school administrators. As an Arizona school administrator elaborated:
The state level requires site councils but it does not necessarily specify what their role is, so in some senses they are advisory, but in our district they have been given all of this decision-making power. So you come in as a principal and you have this agenda, programs you want to put in place and you can’t decide. You can’t even decide who you want as your assistant principal even though that’s the person you will be working closely with.

For this particular school administrator, the decisions were made by the school site councils. In response to this comment, one of the Canadian principals said: ‘We have a nice situation where the community is involved, but not in that context, which I am grateful for.’ Another Ontario school administrator described changes in his power and the nature of his decision-making from authoritarian to more collaborative or distributive in an effort to build capacity:

I find it important to determine priorities and who can support these. So, not owning it totally myself, but how can I share this responsibility and building the capacity within the system or within the school, you know. I can say delegate but, it is really more than that, it is building the support system or accessing a support system that may already be there so that it isn’t solely my responsibility.

As demonstrated in the Ontario Leadership Framework, this notion of sharing responsibility appears to be driven by changing expectations that stakeholders, such as teachers, parents and students, be more involved in educational decision-making (Institute for Education leadership 2013).

### Changing Expectations for School Administrators

Focus group participants agreed that there was an overall increase in expectations for them. These expectations were both driven and exacerbated by budget cuts. One New York school administrator described the situation in this way:

My head is spinning because every year there is increased responsibility added: new policies, network, themes, and all these big budget cuts even with things we have to do. And we cannot hire new people to do these things and fulfil these responsibilities. And the school district comes every year and says, ‘Hey [school administrator’s name], you are going to have to head up this new initiative.’

Another colleague chimed in:

When you look at resources when I began as an assistant principal, we had the principal, myself, curriculum specialist, we had teacher assistants in all the rooms, we had external people there and as I have become principal, those resources have diminished. And it came to the point when I became the principal for the first year, there was no assistant, no office help, there were no Teaching Assistants, there was just the teachers, me and the office manager. And so, all those other jobs then fell to what I would have to – so it was management on the go!

Diminishing human and material resources is another spin-off of budget cuts. This meant that school administrators were now directly assuming more responsibility for the management of schools. School administrators also had to harness networking and communicative skills in order to secure grants to aid their education efforts. An Arizona school administrator expounded on this situation:
We have to be more proactive in searching for grants and looking for partnerships, donations and the competition from schools also. That is a primary factor as you are competing not only amongst private and charter schools, but now within the district itself, in our case, because of a creation of pilot schools about a year ago. If your enrolment is under a certain margin, it becomes a pretty serious issue.

But increasing responsibilities and expectations did not arise only as a response to budget reductions. An Ontario school administrator commented that he recently felt he needed to be ‘a health and safety specialist’ as well as an expert in labour law and contract law.

The most significant change reported was the expectation that school administrators be instructional leaders. Within the current accountability demands, US school administrators face the direct responsibility of ensuring that curriculum and instruction are geared towards student improvement. As stated by one Arizona school administrator:

> We need to articulate stronger programmes about curriculum and instruction. And not just in clinical supervision, but to have that, as lead learner, you need to have a background in curriculum instruction. And I mean we need to be more culturally responsive.

This school administrator is advocating for school principals to have specific knowledge and skills around curriculum instruction.

Within the Ontario perspective, school administrators were seen as the ultimate instructional leader in their schools who must, like their US counterparts, ensure that provincial learning standards/expectations are met. One school administrator proffered: ‘I think what has shifted in the role has been a move to the instructional leadership piece in the province.’ This Ontario school administrator was advocating that administrators learn alongside teachers:

> Clearly, we still see principals as instructional leaders. One of the things that I think you were referring to, though, is a slight turn on that terminology, or seeing principals as learners in their building. To be an instructional leader, the principal needs to be the lead instructional learner and when you refer to principals being at the table asking questions, working with teachers, being in the classrooms, I think that is what you are talking about.

Not only are the practices in which principals must engage in order to fulfil particular expectations important, but so too are the ways in which they engage in these practices, and how they meet expectations. In terms of how principals communicate with others, one systems principal explained:

> It just goes to show how much the job has changed. I mean, look at email communications, and I used to see emails as sending a quick line. Beyond that, you make a phone call. Personally, last night, I signed in and there were 200 emails there. I try to give 11,000 kids, thousands of teachers, individual attention, but it is hardly doable.

The above quote demonstrates a sense that the use of ICT to connect with stakeholders in education had greatly increased.

The five interrelated themes from the focus group discussions provided principals in both Ontario and the USA with an opportunity to reflect on areas affecting not only their work, but that of the educators, students and families around them. Financial impacts on schools affected the operation and delivery of quality education, especially for diverse groups in need of special programmes. The increased accountability and governmental cut-off timelines in the USA carried unattainable goals that impact leadership and student performances. Lastly, the changes in principal power and expectations for performance had pushed principals to be, at the minimum, effective instructional leaders. In the next section, we discuss the comparative aspects of this research.
Discussion
In Canada, some joke that the country is the ‘51st state of the USA’. This statement is indicative of widely held assumptions that Canada and the USA are quite similar in many ways, and share a bond as a result of proximity and economic ties. However, there are some significant differences between Canada and the USA. These general assumptions seem to include the administering of public education as well. However, public schooling is very different between these two countries, and this article demonstrates just how different public education can be, particularly in relation to school principals and what they do. At first glance, it appeared that principals participating in dialogue in the focus group sessions were commiserating about very similar experiences. But in fact, as the findings indicate, principals from different jurisdictions had varying experiences of similar educational issues.

What the findings in this study indicate is that the work of principals is changing. Many of these changes are not explicit. Principals are still ‘doing’ what they have always been expected to do (create visions, build relationships with numerous stakeholders, support organisational growth and improve student success); it is the ways in which principals go about fulfilling expectations that have changed. How principals communicate, for example, is different than ten years ago. This change was illustrated in the focus groups when one principal mentioned the numbers of emails they received on a given day. Advances in ICT have expanded the ways in which principals are able to share information and interact with various stakeholders. A second way in which principals’ work has changed is that their repertoire of roles has expanded. As reported earlier, principals are no longer expected to be simply managers of the building, nor simply instructional leaders; they are now expected to take on additional roles (for example, as a health and safety officer or legal expert/advocate) because their work context and/or (in some cases) legislation demand that they do so.

As the findings demonstrate, the principals in the focus group sessions indicated that, overall, they are experiencing a period of work intensification (Pollock 2014a). This work intensification has occurred not only in terms of increased expectations, roles and tasks, but also in terms of the rate at which principals are expected to engage and carry out these tasks. One wonders, what will be the breaking point?

Conclusion
This article presents key findings from focus group discussions featuring practising international school administrators speaking about issues surrounding school leadership, especially regarding the changing nature of their work within a current neo-liberal and accountability-driven era. Some could argue that the changing nature of principals’ work has contributed to the shortage of qualified principals. Others argue that this awareness should inform principal preparation programmes so that future principals will have the requisite skills to successfully improve schools. Still others believe that this knowledge can be useful to inform jurisdictional policies that will help shape the role of the principal into a work arrangement that is realistic, manageable and organised for success.
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The Practice of Socially Just Leadership: Contextual Differences between US and Swedish Principals

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Abstract: The concept of social justice is understood in myriad ways, largely based on the context in which it is placed. This qualitative study examines the meaning of social justice as perceived by four international school principals who self-identified as social justice leaders, two in Sweden and two in the USA. The findings uncovered many similarities in the practice and behaviours of the principals at the meso level as well as similar values formed at the micro level. However, stark differences were found at the macro level. While Swedish principals felt confident and empowered in their work, the US principals often felt alone and expressed the view that their passion for social justice was subsumed by the requirements of accountability mandates. The findings from this study may begin a conversation of the expectations and barriers principals face as they attempt to practice social justice in international contexts.

Approached from several perspectives, ‘social justice’, as it pertains to schools, carries many meanings. Bogotch (2000), as cited in Furman & Shields (2005), defined social justice as ‘a deliberate intervention that challenges fundamental inequities that arise, in large part, due to the inappropriate use of power by one group over another’ (p. 123). The idea of social justice may be viewed in terms of inclusion, such as of those who are marginalised by race, gender, ability, poverty or culture/language (Larson & Murtadha 2002; Scheurich & Skrla 2003; Artiles, Harris-Murri & Rostenberg 2006; Jean-Marie 2008), as well as systemic participation (Ryan 2006). Fuller (2012) references ‘the moral imperative to make a difference for all children to ensure the marginalized and disadvantaged, for whatever reason, are given equal opportunities to both achieve academically and to develop mutually respectful relationships’ (p. 685). Novak (2000) equates social justice to a ‘work of virtue’ (p. 3), while Ryan (2006) references studies of social justice and researchers who believe in the ‘deeper moral purpose’ of social justice leadership (p. 3). Researchers have also indicated that leaders for social justice work from the wider view, including the whole; that is, advocating for children of all races, class, gender, disabilities and sexual orientations (Theoharis 2004).

1 This research was conducted as part of the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN), Social Justice Strand, a joint research venture sponsored by the British Educational Leadership, Management, and Administration Society (BELMAS) and the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA). The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the authors.
The literature also speaks of social justice in terms of distribution of resources (Rawls 1972; Cribb & Gewirtz 2003) – not only material resources and income, but also the capital that is more difficult to measure, such as rights and respect (North 2006). Furman & Shields (2005) note that inequities may take the form of attitudes and expectations, in particular a belief that certain groups are ‘intrinsically less able to succeed in the academic program of a school, exercise leadership, or make viable democratic decisions’ (p. 125).

How the concept of social justice is understood and practiced differs according to its interpretation, both locally and globally. An examination of the varied meanings of social justice, particularly as it applies to schools, finds that research has not provided a clear path for how to interpret socially just leadership. Our purpose was to glean the meaning of social justice through the eyes of those who practice it within the context of that practice. As Cribb and Gewirtz (2003) remind us, ‘only by analyzing examples of practices aimed at promoting social justice [can we] explore how tensions and conflicts might be overcome or accommodated in reality’ (p. 22). Using a multi-site case study design, this exploratory qualitative research delves into the perceptions of two principals in the USA and two principals in Sweden, guided by the following questions: (1) How do social justice leaders make sense of ‘social justice’? (2) What do socially just leaders do? (3) What factors help and hinder the work of socially just leaders? (4) How do leaders learn to become leaders of social justice?

This study is framed in the macro, meso, and micro context of the leader, explicated in the following section. The overview of the conceptual framework is followed by a review of the macro context of the USA and Sweden as a foundation for understanding the policies under which principals operate in these two countries. The meso and micro contexts of the four principals inform the findings regarding their views of social justice, the impact of policy and mandates on socially just decision-making, and formation of their identity as a socially just leader. We conclude with an analysis and discussion of the similarities and points of departure in how the school leaders approach socially just leadership in these global contexts.

**Conceptual framework**

A widely accepted notion is that leadership is contextual (Day 2007; Johansson, Moos, Nihlfors, Merok Paulsen & Risku 2011). A critical aspect of this research is an examination of perceptions and behaviours of socially just leaders within the macro, meso and micro context where they are practiced. To illustrate the complexity of context in the work of school leaders, we turn to the work of the International School Leader Development Network (ISLDN) and the framework which guides the research of the network project (ISLDN Social Justice Strand 2014) (see Figure 1). This framework will serve as the lens through which we view the enactment of social justice in this study. Macro and meso components of the framework will be explicated, followed by positioning each principal within their individual contexts. The micro context specific to each principal is discussed as part of the findings gleaned from principal interviews.
Figure 1: Macro-Meso-Micro Framework for Social Justice

The ISLDN macro context includes two aspects: the larger context of the nation state in which the school is placed, and the educational discourses that predominate the nation state. Both contextual elements, albeit at the wider national level, impact local decision-making and policies that can either support the school leader or act as a hindrance in the pursuit of equality for all children.

The socio-cultural dimension of the macro context encompasses the political facet, or the prevailing philosophy of the country’s governing body; the economic component, which includes the distribution of that wealth; and the social element, which refers to the country’s predominant ethnicity as well as the religious influence on the national educational context. This study took place in two countries: Sweden and USA. These countries are diverse not only in their basic societal values but also in their understanding of the term social justice. Therefore, foundational to understanding the findings from this research is an understanding of the macro social and political context within which schools operate.

**Sweden: A Welfare State**

Sweden is a welfare state with strong social democratic values. With fewer than 10 million inhabitants, Sweden has a history of open elections and debates which frame democracy and freedom of speech as fundamental societal values. Living under 200 years of peace, most inhabitants have a middle class background, embracing ethnic diversity.

Government services operate well, with preschool, schools, university and healthcare subsidised through the tax system. In Swedish schools, all children have free lunches and free schoolbooks, and there is no fee to attend university. Citizens willingly pay taxes as long as these taxes are fairly distributed and used for what is deemed important.

With a stable economy and an interest in solving global issues, Sweden has recently seen an increasing number of immigrants. In 2010, 14.1 per cent of the Swedish population were refugees, compared to 13.5 per cent of the population in the USA (UNHCR). Sweden is sometimes described as part of the Nordic model or discourse; that is, ‘a more equal society and flat hierarchies with participatory democracy and a comprehensive schooling with strong local community roots. The Nordic discourse also builds on a very long tradition for trust between stakeholders.’ (Moos 2013: 1).

During the last decades, neoliberal ideas have influenced Swedish society. Free choice has become an important value that has filtered through to the school system. Consequently, many independent schools have opened and most agree that they are a permanent fixture, despite claims that these schools profit from public taxes. Though a national school act and a national curriculum predominate, responsibilities for hiring principals and teachers, as well as providing resources to schools, are decentralised to the municipalities. The Swedish state school inspection regularly controls each school and provides official reports on the schools’ leadership and achievement results.

**The Swedish School’s Democratic Mission**

The Swedish school’s democratic mission began with the commission for elementary school education in 1914, emphasising the importance of learning to be an active member of society (Folkskolekommittén 2014). The 1946 School Commission asserted that citizens in a democratic society must have an open mind that resists undemocratic ideas. The democratic school’s primary task is to develop free people, devoted to cooperation and the pursuit of happiness. This text, developed during the Second World War and published just after peace came to Europe, treated

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schooling as a moral project, and the objectives from the School Commission’s report remain valid today (Johansson & Svedberg 2013). In 1968, the then Minister of Education, and later Prime Minister, Olof Palme, illustrated how schooling can be understood as a goals-based contextual moral practice, claiming that ‘the school must be a spearhead into the future classless society’ (Andersson & Nilsson 2000: 157). In 1994, a curriculum which focused on both academic and social goals for schools was introduced. This trend has continued with the current curriculum for Swedish compulsory schools, divided into three sections: basic school values and the school mission, general educational goals and guidelines, and syllabi and knowledge demands (Skolverket 2011a).

A generally accepted value is that students should be prepared for a life with people of other cultures, emphasising equality, solidarity and joint responsibility (Nilsson 1997). The current curriculum and the School Act (Skollagen) stipulate that the school must impart a world view and shape pupils to fundamental values, including the inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable (Skollagen 2010; Skolverket 2010, 2011a, 2011b). These values are meant to saturate all school activities and constitute a common frame of reference.

The curriculum promotes an equivalent and equitable education for all, with the understanding that education should be adapted to each pupil’s circumstances and needs, based on that pupil’s background, earlier experiences, language and knowledge. How this should be realised is up to the principal and teachers to interpret, based on the local school context. Schools are viewed as important social institutions, with education viewed as ‘a primary means of facilitating the harmonious development of a diverse society’ (Lumby & Heystek 2011: 5).

Sweden: From Policy to Practice

Promoting diversity in schools is not an easy task. Ethnic and religious diversity, and the increasing percentage of students with traditions and languages originating from outside Sweden, have combined to challenge a traditional presumption of homogeneity and have evoked the need for educational changes (Norberg, 2009).

Schools are generally characterised as mono-cultural with assimilation as an underpinning goal, whereas students with migrant backgrounds are described from a deficit perspective as ‘different’ from the ‘ordinary’ or ‘normal’ Swedish student (Kamali 2006; Bouakaz 2007; Gruber 2007; Runfors 2007). This assertion is supported by Johansson, Davis & Geijer (2007), who report an example of a mono-cultural organisation in an ethnic multicultural school. This school welcomed diversity in its rhetoric, while in practice demonstrating a desire for assimilation. As Lahdenperä (2006) noted, ‘Swedishness is the starting point for norms, ideals or goals for remedial measures and teaching’ (p. 92).

This viewpoint is reflected in periodic reports from the Swedish National Agency, which demonstrates problematic statistics on students’ scores from a multicultural perspective. Despite a gradual increase in students’ academic achievement since 1998, the figures show that the gap in performance between pupils has increased and there is still a strong correlation between socioeconomic background and how students succeed in schools. Socioeconomic factors largely affect students’ school achievement, and taking this into account removes the differences in the ratings results between ethnic Swedish pupils and those with an immigrant background (Skolverket 2004, 2005, 2009, 2013). Students whose parents have a low educational level generally achieve lower grades than those with highly educated parents. This tendency becomes particularly evident

3 The Swedish curriculum for the school system is a set of documents that contains educational goals and guidelines for preschools, compulsory schools, leisure time centres and upper secondary schools.
at the school level when increased residential segregation occurs, which might have an impact on a family’s assimilation into Swedish society. However, there are also examples of schools that succeed despite challenging circumstances, due to structure and work culture (Gu & Johansson 2012). These circumstances illustrate school performance trends with students’ background as one significant variable in principals’ work in social justice.

The USA: Equal Educational Opportunity

As a large country with fifty states, each operating under the same national guidelines but with individualised state and local education policies, a singular meso context is impossible to apply to schools in the USA. The USA is often referred to as ‘a melting pot’ of cultures, ethnicities, religions and philosophies. Schools, as a result, have many social justice issues to face, including gaps in achievement between races and gender, students with disabilities, and an ever increasing disparity in income groups. Thus, US educational policy following the Second World War emphasised two goals: first, providing equal educational opportunities for all children; and second, demonstration of accountability for the educational outcomes of all children. These two goals have, at times, worked at odds for principals who practice social justice leadership. As school leaders have worked towards the first goal of providing equal educational opportunities for all children, state and federal mandates targeting the second goal of accountability sometimes hinder the ability of principals to work for social justice.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) has been called the single most influential legislation in American educational history, as well as the most costly. This law was passed as part of President Johnson’s ‘War on Poverty’, in light of his educational policy agenda to increase educational opportunities for the poor. Johnson saw ESEA as a way to ‘bring education into the front ranks of the nationwide assault on poverty’ (Grady 2012: 517) and to fund education with the goal of moving US children out of the throes of deprivation. The level of funding was calculated from family welfare rolls (federal assistance to families living in poverty) and the number of families who lived below the poverty line in each state.

The passage of ESEA also began a political era in which school responsibility to the public became more closely linked to receipt of federal funding, with every major national educational policy initiative demanding reports of accountability indicators (Fowler 2013). This public reporting of outcomes also came with increasing national intervention in state educational policy, a point of contention for proponents of states’ rights and fidelity to the intent of the US Constitution, Amendment X.

No Child Left Behind Act

George W. Bush’s national education policy, manifested in the regular renewal of ESEA, is known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. This act continued federal funding, but also included mandated annual standardised testing as the measure of success for public schools. Unsuccessful schools received negative consequences, which ranged from public labelling to reconstitution. Any school or school district that failed to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) would be sanctioned in progressively more severe ways. For the first time in US educational history, the federal government mandated state-wide curriculum content standards, standardised testing of competency in the standards, public reporting of test results, and a series of consequences for failure to demonstrate student proficiency in the standards.
Perhaps the greatest concern of opponents to the law was the initial assumption of the policy-makers. NCLB is an educational policy framed in a system of inputs and outputs, with public accounting for the outputs. However, the difficulty in imagining education as a knowledge and skills factory is that not all students enter school on a level playing field. Not all children begin their school careers with the same foundation, language or abilities, while others progress through school with disabilities, whether physical, mental or emotional. The expectation that all students must proficiently meet standards on the same tests to adequately progress to the next level each year is unrealistic, at best. Notions of social justice remained absent from the discussion.

The original iteration of ESEA in 1965 called for a reauthorisation of the law every five years. Since NCLB was passed during the 2001 reauthorisation, the next was due in 2006. However, as of June 2012, Congress had failed to act on the concerns of educators. Frustrated with the lack of movement, the US Department of Education, under the leadership of President Barack Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan, sought to address what they viewed as flaws in NCLB and the ‘unintended results of NCLB’s strictest requirements’, which were ‘hindering further school reforms and innovations’ (U.S. Department of Education 2012). Under a flexibility agreement, states may request waivers from the NCLB requirements in exchange for rigorous reform at the state level to address teacher quality and narrowing the achievement gap. While affirming that the NCLB goals were correct and that effective teaching was essential to student achievement, President Obama noted that lowering curriculum standards and teaching to standardised tests would not reach these goals. Therefore, accountability remained paramount, since states must continue to demonstrate accountability will be held to the original NCLB requirements, and face sanctions if they are not met. In announcing this new educational policy, the president tied this policy to the economic needs of the country and the ability of the US to compete globally.

**Meso Context**

The meso context in this study refers to the school context – both student and community descriptors – as well as the school governance. The market forces that influence the school context are also considered here. This might include whether school attendance is by parent choice or local government zoning. The four principals included in this study each work in a separate meso context.

The Swedish participants included one female principal (FP) from a compulsory school (ages 6-15) and a male principal (MP) from a secondary school (ages 16-18). Both schools are independent inner city schools located in the same large multicultural city. Most students have made an active choice to attend these schools, arriving by bus and therefore not residents of the surrounding neighbourhoods. As independent schools, they are founded by public money but are not connected to a district or municipality, instead having their own governing board of parents and staff.

The US participants were both male principals. One US principal (RP) was a first year Caucasian principal at a rural southeastern US school characterised by high poverty, with a large number of students with disabilities. The US urban principal (UP), a veteran African American principal located in the US Deep South, had over ten years of experience leading schools. At the time of the interview he was placed in a large urban high school characterised by a diverse student population, though the predominant student population was African American.

The US schools in this study are approximately 600 miles apart, with very different student populations and community cultures. Both schools are supported by public money, generated
through taxes, and governed by boards of education who are locally elected and not often educators. Local government zoning regulates attendance, though in the rural school students outside of the attendance zone may be offered admission if space in the school allows. See Table 1 for the participant and contextual data.

Methodology

To eliminate bias in sample selection the participants were identified through snowball sampling, seeking to identify principals who demonstrated behaviours committed to reducing inequality as part of their daily leadership practice. School improvement status standing and student outcome scores were not considered. Participants were solicited to volunteer for interviews based on peer perceptions of their leadership style and behaviour as regards being committed to social justice. Qualitative data were collected through interviews with four principals, two from the USA and two from Sweden. All interviews took place in the respective principal’s office except for the UP interview, which was conducted by phone. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and was digitally recorded, then transcribed verbatim. Using a priori coding, the interviews were analysed, guided by the research questions. Due to language differences, an initial obstacle in the data collection was how to translate the construct of social justice into Swedish, since an exact translation would not be a familiar concept. Therefore, prior to beginning each Swedish interview, the concept of social justice was discussed with the participants to provide a context for the interview questions and ensure that the answers could be comparable with the US data.

Findings

Making sense of social Justice

Both the principals from Sweden emphasised that social justice meant individuals had the right to be valued and respected. Moreover, despite their background, students should be held to high expectations and encouraged to aspire to whatever they wanted. As the Swedish female principal (FP) noted, ‘to get students to respect and be responsible to each other are the most important issue’. The male Swedish principal (MP) agreed, saying that, ‘[i]n school satisfaction surveys students say that they are comfortable here because you can be who you are. It is the key to equality. Nobody is judgmental or has negative thoughts about anyone else. You can be who you are and are respected for this.’

According to both Swedish principals, many of their students have problems in reading and writing. The principals believed that assisting students in concentrating on their studies requires a sufficient number of competent teachers who can understand the problems, enabling them to support the students despite their individual differences. MP stated that as a result of economic prerequisites, he has the freedom to structure the school to help those who need the most support.

When both principals talked about injustice, their major concern was poverty and the socioeconomic segregation which has impacted student school success. However, they expressed concern that the values from different perspectives (social class, gender and ethnicity) brought into the multicultural school collide with the values the school represents. MP explained, ‘it is important that students learn all aspects of values. It is very difficult with guys who have a power perspective. They don’t show it at the school but get it from home.’
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Grade configuration</th>
<th>Student population</th>
<th>Student ethnicity</th>
<th>Economically disadvantaged students</th>
<th>Students with disabilities</th>
<th>Principal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural town, southeastern US</td>
<td>Grades 9-12</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>88.5% White</td>
<td>61.3%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban principal: USA</td>
<td>Grades 9-12</td>
<td>1128</td>
<td>41.8% White</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City female principal: Sweden</td>
<td>Grades 9-12</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>58.2% Non-White</td>
<td>65.8%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City male principal: Sweden</td>
<td>Compulsory (ages 6-15)</td>
<td>565</td>
<td>&lt;1% White</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Experience as principal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>EdD</td>
<td>12 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NPP</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>NPP</td>
<td>NPP</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The US principals described being a social justice leader as providing opportunity for all students, now and in preparation for the future. The urban principal (UP) stated that social justice means:

- treating all kids with dignity and respect so that they know that their value is of substance, that they mean something to somebody somewhere. That they are given the opportunity to be whatever they want to be and are successful at it, regardless of what their background may be.

UP believes that working towards social justice means all children are given an equal chance to be their best self. In schools, this translates into all stakeholders treating children with dignity and respect. The rural principal (RP) agreed, stating that social justice allows:

- teachers to see the value in each of those students and for administrators to see the value in each of those students… to where they can lead and guide and direct that student on that path of learning to better themselves for their future is the crux of social justice.

To work toward social justice, the school leader must not only believe that all students can achieve and learn, but must also have a desire to make school a place where students can accomplish this. However, actually carrying out this vision is more difficult. RP noted that as an administrator, he is able to see the broader picture of the school. In terms of social justice there is a delicate balance, and he explained that, ‘making changes for one group may create an injustice for another group’.

**Behaviours of Socially Just Leaders**

The Swedish principals had differing ways of working through social justice issues. FP discussed emotions and understanding, along with the importance of seeing, talking and making students aware of rights and prejudices (their own as well as those of others). MP talked more about the structure; that is, having the same rules and routine for everyone – rules that build on high expectations and responsibility. He emphasised the importance of supporting good behaviour and talking with those who did not live up to the expectations.

What the principals had in common was that they were present in the daily life of the school, always aware and acting in relation to their beliefs. Being present allowed the principals to act and make decisions quickly, when necessary. FP noted that, in the end, she is responsible for her teachers and students. She relayed an incident where a student treated a pregnant woman disrespectfully. The principal stated that,

> Another teacher found out about the incident and the teacher screamed angrily but did not have the energy to address the student about it. So I will take that conversation instead, but I don’t judge the student…I take action for better and for worse… That is how it is here; nothing to reflect about. I often act on intuition.

This principal felt that it was necessary for the adults to act on smaller as well as larger incidents, so everyone could feel secure. Potential problem issues need to be addressed every day rather than being topic for a single lesson or thematic event. MP stressed the need for good relationships with the students. This sometimes required difficult decisions and conversations with the teachers to uphold student trust.

The US social justice leaders expressed that they provided two essential elements for their communities: voice and models. In addition to providing a voice for the students who either can’t or won’t speak for themselves, UP said he models the behaviour he wants others to practice. RP agreed, stating that,
Every person has individual needs. Every person has a value, not only to themselves but to the world. You never know which student might be that one student that ends up making a difference.

As the voice of those students who are marginalised, the social justice leader must work to not lose sight of any group of children. RP stated that keeping a heightened awareness is important. The principal must:

- Be very aware of everything that is going on, especially with those groups who you know sometimes feel like they cannot fight for themselves, such as your special needs students.
- You are fighting tooth and nail to try to get them all the funding and all their opportunities and working them into a more inclusive environment.

Modelling behaviour is grounded in values. UP believed that modelling a culture of learning in the school allows marginalised students to see that education translates into opportunity. This culture of learning for the at-risk child is achieved through support to ensure not only student success, but teacher success as well. He sees this as a proactive and preventative model, in contrast to the laissez-faire principal who waits for issues to come to him. UP gave an example of social injustice in the classroom.

If I have a kid in class who has a lot of issues, has a lot going on in his personal life, they are bringing those same things to school. Nobody is trying to probe them as far as what is going on and why they are not being successful in the classroom...If that teacher does not know how to use effective instructional practices or does not use student data to determine what is the root cause of why they are failing, then that kid can actually have all the skills and abilities to be successful in that classroom but the teacher has not addressed his other social needs.

Thus, both US principals agreed that to truly practice social justice, school leaders must be ever vigilant. This involves constantly working to meet the needs of all students, providing tools to teachers to promote their success, building on improvements, and continuously re-evaluating their work as a leader for social justice.

**Internal and External Support for and Barriers to Socially Just Leadership**

Both Swedish principals said that nothing hinders their work as leaders for social justice. As MP stated, ‘[a]s a principal you can lead in the direction you chose to lead’. Those staff members who did not work in accordance with the stipulated values sooner or later looked for another job, as he pointed out clearly that their attitudes were not acceptable. FP referred more explicitly to steering documents such as the Education Act and the curriculum, noting that she ‘always return[s] to my assignment and ask myself: what are my obligations?’

MP also expressed concerns about school size, saying that, ‘[w]e are very close here at the school, despite us having 560 students, but with size there is less control of those who are on the wrong path’. Moreover, municipality board decisions influence the number of students who attend. Despite the difficulties associated with working in a multicultural school, most teachers from these schools chose this type of work. Both principals see competent personnel with the right attitudes towards the students as essential to success. MP reported that when problems were encountered, he went to the faculty and asked, ‘what we can do about it, with an emphasis on we’. The work of social justice leadership must be a joint mission of collaboration between the principals, teachers and the students.
Both US principals stated that because of the background and community of many of the children who do not have opportunities, the work of social justice must take place within a school structure that, according to UP,

may be completely different from the streets that you walk every day but once you come into this building, they know that this structure is going to provide safety for them, an opportunity for them to grow as an individual, an opportunity for them to express themselves, but they also know that there are checks and balances in place for them.

The structure and the expectations become a part of a positive identity. RP also practiced the idea of structure and identity, as well as establishing relationships with the larger community outside of the school. He explained a situation that led to a paradigm shift for a large number of people.

We had a situation that happened at the beginning of this school year, where I had to restrain a female student. The female student was African American. There was a large outcry that I had done that because I was a racist. To combat that, I worked really hard with specific individuals in the community…Probably as an indirect result of what happened with me as the leader of the school, I found out what’s going on in the community.

Interestingly, RP stated that the greatest obstacle that he perceived to social justice leadership was time. Because social justice leadership to him was so steeped in the values of care and meeting needs, practicing care for both students and teachers required time that he sometimes did not have. He shared that ‘to get to the heart of what is really going on’ requires energy, data collection and addressing each situation individually.

In reflecting on state and district policies and mandates, RP noted that his hands are often tied in decision-making and that ‘we feel like we need to focus on the end result in a lot of cases, rather than the whole child’. He believes that with the marginalised child, rather than focusing on the deficits, leaders should examine the causes of those deficits, thus creating opportunities for greater achievements.

UP noted that district, parental and teacher support obviously make the job of a social justice leader much easier. However, a lack of such support can be devastating. UP stated that,

The state mandates can also cause some issues by not meeting the individual needs of our students. Teachers who don’t work toward meeting a common goal, whose vision is not aligned towards student growth for all kids, are all things that work towards social injustice.

The Micro Context

To gain an understanding of the foundational knowledge and values which formed the importance of social justice in their work, all principals were asked about their micro context; that is, the background which led to their current beliefs about social justice. The responses of the four principals regarding these influences were quite similar, despite their different contexts. Experiences from their childhood, family or significant others were cited as shaping the values that affected their work a school leader. The rural principal, from a small southern US town, stated that, ‘like most values, it is established through your parents. I had a tremendous example through my father, mother, grandfather, and immediate family about how to treat people.’

The African-American urban principal faced a great deal of social injustice in his youth, but was able to broaden his world outlook through friends. While poverty closed many doors to him, he noted the influence of one friend’s family. UP explained that,
Growing up in an at-risk home but hanging around with a friend who had money and a father who exposed me to other areas...helped me to broaden my vocabulary and allowed me to learn new things. I can pay attention to those kids with the same background as I had and say to them that regardless of where you come from, you actually have the ability to be anything that you want.

His life experiences and current successes have allowed him to relate to and provide motivation to those children who may believe that they cannot overcome their current realities to reach their dreams.

Half a world away, the female Swedish principal agreed that she ‘has also seen people suffer at close distant…’. She believes that self-knowledge and awareness are essential to social justice leadership, because ‘the more knowledge you have about yourself, learning and schools the more you can contribute to others development’. As with the US principals, role models were significant, in addition to the Principal Training programme and other formal courses, in shaping their views of social justice. MP referred to a principal he considered to have an inner moral compass, describing her as ‘very firm and determined when it came to social justice issues despite the staff’s different opinion’.

**Discussion**

The four principals interviewed in this study practice social justice in vastly different national contexts. Schools in Sweden operate in a context and under documents which emphasise democratic values, actively working against discrimination, and with an emphasis on students’ right to an education. The principals in Sweden include social justice in the fundamental values that are a part of their mission, even if limited resources might constrain this work. The external control and public transparency includes how principals handle these issues. While the US principals reported many of the same priorities and values that the Swedish principals did, often noting the same micro influences, the macro contexts under which they worked minimised the importance of working for social justice. The agency of principals is to fulfil the accountability mandates, which, at times, act as barriers to social justice. For all four principals, the context offered both support and barriers to the work of social justice.

The findings from this study clearly illustrate how the social structure of the macro, meso and micro contexts of the school influenced the identity of these leaders, in turn influencing, supporting and sometimes hampering not only their behaviour, but also their ability to make socially just decisions. As Blumer (1969) noted, the self-defining of the four principals as social justice leaders is demonstrated through their language (social interactions), their social construction of reality, and their inner interpretation of social justice.

The language used in discussing the implementation of policy was clearly different in the USA and in Sweden. The US principals spoke in terms of mandates and subgroup data; the Swedish principals spoke in terms of democratic schools. US policy focused on deficits of groups of students and the work of the principal as ‘closing the gap’ between the groups. Swedish policy, on the other hand, guided principals in the work of social objectives supported by community funding.

However, when the principals spoke of their beliefs and interpretations of how they defined and worked for social justice, despite the different contexts, they spoke with one voice. They all expressed a belief in the value of all children, no matter their circumstances or background. They held high expectations for all children. Each principal spoke about the importance of their behaviour in modelling social justice, not only to the children but to the teachers and community
as well. The essential nature of respecting children and providing them with the opportunity to be their best self was at the core of the agency of all four principals, even though the macro and micro contexts under which they worked were vastly different. Thus, the findings from this study point to social justice leaders expressing the same core beliefs but practicing the work of social justice leadership differently, depending on policy and the local context.

As social identity theory postulates (Burke 1980; Stryker 1980, 1987), while the roles may be the same for groups of people, behaviours and actions are determined according to the context in which the roles are placed. All principals valued and held high expectations for all students. However, the Swedish principals were empowered to work for social justice and used their resources to do so. The US principals worked to the extent they were able to for social justice, but did so with a feeling of being disempowered, being forced to work from a deficit model, and being given few resources to do so. The principals’ understanding of their mission allowed for the Swedish principals to view social justice as a part of what all school leaders should do, while the US principals viewed social justice as a part of what a few, committed school leaders do.

This exploratory study in Sweden and the USA uncovered many similarities in how school leaders view education and the role of the school leader in addressing issues of poverty, culture and equity for all. The belief in the goodness and potential of children, no matter their background or social standing, was common. Differences surfaced starkly, however, through the words of the principals who faced the social justice issues in schools on a daily basis. While Swedish principals felt confident and empowered in their work, the US principals often felt alone and quietly expressed the view that their passion for social justice was often subsumed by the requirements of accountability mandates.

While we do not purport that these four principals are representative of the views of the majority of principals in the two countries under study, we suggest that these findings may prompt a conversation about social justice priorities across the globe. We encourage further research on principals’ perceptions of the work of social justice on an international scale, in order to place these discussions in other contexts. As principals work to meet the needs of the whole child, in addition to meeting high expectations for learning, stakeholders at all levels must support school leaders in working for social justice.

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Interactions between Professional Learning Communities and the Educational Culture Where They Are Employed: Comparative Research across Beijing and Ontario Schools

Yi Chen and Coral Mitchell

Abstract: In recent decades, the professional learning community (PLC) has been accepted as an effective framework to improve teachers’ professional capacity. The purpose of this research was to compare and contrast the implementation of PLCs in Chinese and Canadian schools. A qualitative design was used to collect data from two school principals in each location. Data analysis revealed that the root of the differences between PLCs in Beijing and Ontario was the different educational systems as well as the test systems. The Chinese principals had a previously established system to organise time and resources, but the Canadian schools lacked a similar system. Moreover, standardised tests played different roles in China and Canada. The Beijing principals regarded standardised tests as the important purpose of education, whereas Ontario principals saw standardised tests as a tool rather than a primary purpose. These two differences influenced principals’ beliefs, attitudes, strategies and practices.

Introduction

With the transformation to 21st century knowledge-based economies over the last decades (Dimmock & Goh 2011; Hairon & Dimmock 2012), the concept of the professional learning community (PLC) has been adopted by an increasing number of educational institutions as a vehicle to improve educational quality (Seo & Han 2012). As Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas (2006) explain,

PLC [is] a process in which teachers and administrators continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the students’ benefit; thus, this arrangement may also be termed communities of continuous inquiry and improvement. (p. 1)

Over the past two decades, educators and scholars have developed the concept of the PLC with new ideas, explanations and frameworks, but the developments have stayed true to the core value
of collaborative inquiry and the core purpose of building teachers’ capacity to improve student learning (Lieberman, Miller, Roy, Hord & von Frank 2014).

Meanwhile, PLCs that have been employed in certain Asian schools appear to perform differently from those in the West, where the ideas were created. Generally, Asian countries like China have developed cultures that are more collective than Western countries (Wong 2010). Wong (2010) contends that the tradition of collectivism has laid a more solid foundation for teachers to work collaboratively than their Western counterparts enjoy. However, Asian cultures also have relatively strong hierarchical systems so that existing educational practices may ‘remain the modus operandi’ (Hairon & Dimmock 2012: 417). To date, little research has been conducted to investigate how PLCs are implemented in Asian and Western schools. The research reported in this article was undertaken to address that gap by comparing and contrasting the narratives of school principals, two in China and two in Canada, who are implementing PLCs in their schools.

Literature Review

The notion of a PLC arises from an educational paradigm shift in the last few decades in the Western world. According to Mitchell & Sackney (2011), this shift assumes that the principles of social institutions are transforming from managed systems to living systems. To understand an organisation as a living system is to see how it is ‘built to reflect and accommodate the structural, environmental, and relational conditions that support and sustain life’ (Mitchell & Sackney 2011: 3). In responding to the requirements of this alternative perspective, Mitchell & Sackney (2009, 2011) identify PLCs as a means to develop educational capacities in personal, interpersonal and organisational domains. They argue that PLCs help educators to deconstruct the professional narrative that restrains their personal development and to reconstruct capacities in cognition and practice. As individuals’ learning is significantly influenced by their relationships and the character of the group in which they work, interpersonal capacity is a key part of a PLC. An interpersonal context that builds respectful spaces for open and critical collective reflection and goal-sharing will motivate educators’ growth. Finally, the notion of PLCs can help build organisational capacities through time, resources, leadership opportunities and knowledge structures that support teachers’ learning and teaching.

By contrast, the educational system in China is generally hierarchical. Lu and Cao (2009, as cited in Xu 2013) identified two characteristics of traditional professional development in China that connect to this research. First, teachers’ development and training are controlled by external policy-makers and administrators. Teachers are not involved in decision-making and are expected to comply with the rules and requirements rather than use their autonomy to make changes. Second, most of the training is designed around curriculum, textbooks and policy in order to solve immediate problems. As Hairon & Dimmock (2012) emphasise, a strong hierarchical social structure plays a critical role in restraining PLCs from being autonomous communities that work on more than just pedagogical practice, subject matter and student assessment. This observation is supported by other Asian scholars’ contributions, such as Sargent and Hannum (2009); So, Shin & Son (2010); Tsui & Wong (2010); Wong (2010); Seo & Han (2012) and Song (2012).

In China, the Teaching Research Group (TRG, jiaoyanzu in Chinese) system had been used decades before the arrival of the PLC. TRGs, which were introduced from the Soviet Union in the early 1950s, were designed to strengthen teachers’ professional capability by turning individual work into collaborative research. After more than 60 years’ development, as Wong (2010) notes, TRGs represent a Chinese educational norm that emphasises sharing teachers’ ‘personal daily practice’
as an essential approach for teachers to improve teaching competency. However, because of the hierarchical education system in China, TRGs are typically controlled and directed by school administrators rather than by the teachers who work within the TRG.

A further complication is that test-oriented education deeply influences the performance of PLCs in Chinese schools. For example, teachers working in a test-oriented educational context share ‘core teaching activities and established teaching methods [that] stems from their main pre-occupation of achieving high student academic test results’ (Hairon & Dimmock 2012: 414). Tsui & Wong (2010) quoted a teacher, Li, who observed that although teachers try to broaden their educational knowledge, they have to focus on ‘conceptual matters and the knowledge points’ (p. 304) that will be tested on the examination. As a result, teachers’ personal capacity is hard to develop beyond pedagogical skills. However, Wong (2010), another Chinese researcher, believes that this mechanism supports collective learning. He contends that the concentration on examinations unites teachers to learn collectively. Thus, shared personal daily practice becomes a norm among Chinese teachers. If a common educational goal has been achieved (which in China is achieving high test scores), PLCs have supported teachers’ professional development, which is the purpose advocated by Jurasaite-Harbison & Rex (2010).

Unfortunately, Wong (2010) also made a contradictory finding in his research. Specifically, some English teachers in China did not see that the collaborations in TRGs were at an in-depth level; they thought that shared practices were a ‘mere formality and lacked mutual engagement’ (p. 630). Moreover, some teachers did not pay attention to the process of sharing and tried to prevent frank dialogue. These behaviours weakened the development of ‘an experimental-oriented working pattern’ (Wong 2010: 630). This result is similar to Tsui & Wong’s (2010) research. They found that about 80 per cent of Chinese teachers preferred guidance from expert teachers or external specialists rather than from discussions among peers. Tsui & Wong call it ‘mentoring practice’, which belongs to the apprenticeship model of professional development. In their study, Chinese mentors were more concerned with increasing teachers’ understanding of ‘subject matter knowledge and instructional strategies’ (p. 288) than with supporting teachers to reflect critically on existing and emerging practices.

Tsui & Wong’s (2010) finding is troubling, in that reflective action has been identified as a crucial strategy for developing professional capacity. Hargreaves & Fullan (2012), for example, propose reflective action as a central strategy for building educators’ intellectual, social and decisional capital. Reflection is especially important for gaining access to the implicit knowledge that is used in day-to-day activity and to maintain the motivation to improve pedagogical practice (Mitchell & Sackney 2011). Critical reflection also allows teachers to work out ‘relational understanding and values’ (Walker 2007: 266). Since almost all of the professional activities in TRGs are subject based (Tsui & Wong 2010), little attention is given to understanding the behaviours or values of teachers. That approach might not be sufficient to develop deep changes in educators’ cognition and practice (Mitchell & Sackney 2011). Thus, learning that is restricted to pedagogical skills and knowledge points should be understood as a limited part of professional knowledge.

In order to transform from surface learning to deep understandings, PLCs should be built not only to support individual teacher growth but also to connect teachers to the knowledge and intelligence of their colleagues. Mitchell & Sackney (2011) suggest that PLCs should support professional conversation that contributes in-depth dialogue about tacit beliefs, understandings and professional knowledge. This provides opportunities to build common views of teaching and to establish a basis of shared purpose and common understandings.
When learning is positioned as a collective process, Stoll et al. (2006) argue that teachers’ professional development is closely related to the culture of a school, team-building and conflict resolution. By way of explanation, in a collective learning space, teachers should understand that conflict is likely to ensue and that ‘contradictions and paradoxes are welcome’ (Mitchell & Sackney 2011: 54). It is important for teachers to learn how to manage conflict productively, rather than seeing it as evidence of ‘mistakes or mismanaged process’ (DuFour & Eaker 1998: 49). Harvey (1977, as cited in Burke 2010) defines most instances of conflict as ‘phony conflict’ (p. 119). As Burke (2010) interprets, such conflict might be the agreement among people not to show their disagreement. People refuse to act because of ‘action anxiety, negative fantasies, real risk, or psychological reversal of risk and certainty’ (Burke 2010: 119) that might arise from a disagreement. Therefore, building an effective climate should create mutual respect for disagreement and differences so that participants can learn from the experiences, insights and intelligence of one another and resolve differences of belief and practice productively (Lee, Zhang & Yin 2011).

With that end in mind, it is possible that harmony-seeking relationships might build a solid interpersonal framework that shapes PLCs in Chinese schools. However, considering the worries about the ‘unpleasant truths’ (Mitchell & Sackney: 24) that could emerge in critical reflection, is the Chinese context a healthy one for PLCs? On one hand, Walker (2007) observes that Chinese people tend to inflate ratings to please superiors. On the other hand, Wong (2010) notes that the key to successful PLCs in China is not only about know-what and know-how, but also know-who, which ‘refers to the social capital of the communities’ (p. 635). According to Wong, Chinese people see interpersonal relationships (guanxi) as the key to success, especially the relationships with their supervisors. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that teachers might not express their real ideas in order to keep the climate harmonious and to make their superiors happy.

Scholars support the idea that the school principal plays a key role in fostering collective and spontaneous professional learning in schools (Mitchell & Sackney 2011; Dimmock 2012). Thus, the PLC assists principals to develop a sophisticated debate platform or, as Senge (2006) describes, a dialogue in which a group can access a large ‘pool of common meaning’ (p. 225) that individuals alone cannot access. Similarly, Mitchell & Sackney (2011) also recommend that a learning community is ‘better served by horizontal stratification in which hierarchical levels are reduced and power is dispersed throughout the school’ (p. 99) because teachers cannot achieve collective learning and belief-sharing until the structure opens spaces for free conversation and autonomous professional practice.

In China, it is assumed that the dominant purpose of professional activities in TRGs is to strengthen teachers’ understanding of subject matter, knowledge points and pedagogical skills (Tsui & Wong 2010; Wong 2010). In that context, the leaders’ responsibility is to organise the learning process effectively and efficiently through a top-down process. Most Chinese teachers accept the hierarchical mentoring and training model (Wong 2010). The question is: Does this leadership really provide the organisational capacity to motivate teachers’ learning?

MacBeath & Cheng (2008) propose that leadership activity in PLCs should invite people to lead their own professional community. As DuFour & Eaker (1998) and Mitchell & Sackney (2011) note, school administrators are expected to build mutual, respectful and interdependent relationships and to guarantee that practices are focused on learning and teaching. By contrast to leadership in TRGs, the purpose of leading learning in PLCs is to motivate teachers to find the gaps between ‘existing conditions and desired realities, and to find effective and desirable ways to close at least some of those gaps’ (Mitchell & Sackney: 124). To lead an effective PLC, people should rely not
Wong (2010) has pointed out that Chinese schools are characterised by authoritarian leadership that emphasises consensus and social harmony. Some scholars believe that this cultural foundation could reduce conflict and achieve common goals among colleagues (e.g. Sargent & Hannum 2009; Wong 2010). However, Hairon & Dimmock (2012) developed contradictory arguments from their research in Singapore. They found that in a centralised system, PLCs can be restricted to innovations that only focus on pedagogical practice, curricular designs and teaching materials. Moreover, empowering teachers in such an unaligned situation would be counterproductive because, as Hargreaves & Fullan (2012) argue, administratively imposed goals and practices create ‘a degree of inflexibility that violates the discretionary judgment that is central to teachers’ professionalism and professional capital, and thus are ultimately superficial and short-lived’ (p. 119). Song’s (2012) research could be regarded as evidence. Song found that Chinese educational curriculum reforms in 2001 started to emphasise teacher empowerment, but traditional professional training had not prepared teachers to accept this new concept.

This review of the literature has shown that the cultural conditions of a country can affect how PLCs are implemented. In China, education is strongly influenced by the standardised-test assessment system, which puts more examination pressure on Chinese schools than is the case in Canadian schools. Moreover, the education system in China is more hierarchical and authoritarian than the system in Canada, which affects the extent to which teachers can, or are willing to, speak out and take on leadership activities. However, China has a long cultural history of harmony and collectivism, which provides a ready-made foundation for the interpersonal elements of PLCs. What the literature does not clarify is the extent to which these differences affect the implementation of PLCs in these two countries.

**Methodology**

To explore school principals’ understanding and implementation of PLCs in Chinese and Canadian schools, qualitative research was chosen for the design. Four principals, two in the Canadian province of Ontario and two in the Chinese city of Beijing, were invited to participate in individual semi-structured interviews, which enabled them to express and explain their experiences and understandings (Edmonds & Kennedy 2013). The Ontario principals were interviewed face-to-face, whereas the Beijing participants were interviewed through WeChat (an online text and voice messaging communication service). To decrease misunderstanding caused by language barriers, English was used to conduct the interviews with the Ontario participants and Chinese was used with the Beijing participants. Because this research requires a high level of understanding, knowledge and practice of PLCs and the will to share that knowledge, participants were chosen purposively (Edmonds & Kennedy 2013) from principals who have had experience with implementing and participating in PLCs’ professional activities in their schools and who were willing to be interviewed.

The interview questions were designed according to Mitchell & Sackney’s (2011) capacity-building framework to collect participants’ narratives on their experiences with PLCs across four aspects. The first aspect was participants’ general knowledge, understanding and attitude toward PLC. The remaining three aspects concerned participants’ development of personal, interpersonal and organisational capacity. These questions were related to themes such as professional development, peer relationships, teacher empowerment and leadership, with the substance of the questions...
being drawn from a comprehensive review of the literature related to PLCs. Data were collected through audiotaped interviews on how these principals implemented or participated in PLCs in their schools. Each interview lasted between one and one and a half hours.

Data analysis was based on Edmonds & Kennedy’s (2013) advice that narrative analysis should classify individual stories into general patterns. Data were subjected to within-case and cross-case analyses to examine the information in individual narratives and to generate themes and patterns emerging across the narratives. The within-case analysis began with a set of labels based on Mitchell & Sackney’s (2011) framework of personal, interpersonal and organizational capacity. A worksheet was constructed with the theoretical concepts across the top and participants’ identifiers along the side of the grid. Data segments from individual transcripts were sorted into the cells in the grid and examined for individual ideas and understandings. To conduct the cross-case analysis, the worksheet was examined to identify common ideas as well as differences across the data display. The similarities and differences were classified into a small set of themes that accounted for the data on the worksheet. Finally, the transcripts were read again in order to avoid missing important information and potential findings.

**Results of the Study**

The literature review suggested that the expression of PLCs varied according to the educational culture in Asian and Western schools. This suggestion was confirmed in the data, in that certain interactions between PLCs and the existing educational culture were evident in the data generated by the Ontario and Beijing principals. However, similarities were also found in their narratives. The similarities and differences are classified according to the three themes emerging from the data analysis: (a) identity and capacity development, (b) disagreement and safe climate, and (c) leadership and decision-making. These themes are used to present the results of the study. In the presentation, the Beijing principals are identified as CPA and CPB (Chinese Principal A and B) and the Ontario principals as OPA and OPB (Ontario Principal A and B).

**Identity and Capacity Development**

Since PLCs are based on the principles of sharing, cooperation and mutual respect of diversities, this provides opportunities for educators to deconstruct their original self-identity that confines their professional development and to reconstruct a new identity to create an effective learning climate in schools (Mitchell & Sackney 2009, 2011). All of the principals in this research presented transformations of their identities.

Principal CPA mentioned that the most significant change for him was the transformation from isolation to cooperation and openness. He stated that collective work is more important than individual effort because the sharing leads to group members’ collective growth. He said,

> I think people should cooperate. Previously, I preferred to finish all the things by myself. But now I believe that it is important to finish tasks by cooperation, especially by mutual supports. I have changed the opinion of protecting my ideas from being stolen to openly share them with someone else. Nowadays, I believe that sharing makes people learn more. We learn and grow together.

CPB reported that the changes in his leadership were ‘the awareness of service [and] more respect for teachers’ different voice and both the formal and informal group they have’. Similarly, OPA described herself as a ‘facilitator’ who finds resources for teachers. She said,
It gives me a good idea of what the capacity of staff is. Then I can see maybe I need to bring in some external support for math or something else. Because I have a better idea of what their needs are, and how I can support them, they can become better teachers for their students.

This identity helped her to know the teachers from diverse perspectives. The knowledge of diversity among the teachers was also a key learning for OPB. She noted that her plans to initiate a PLC in her new school were shaped by the level of capacity of the teachers in the school. She said,

I am going to have to start a little slower than I [normally] would. And I have to be more prescriptive to begin with because they are not used to working collaboratively. So I have to build that capacity before we can really move forward.

The finding of changed beliefs and practices, as informed by their experiences with implementing PLCs in their schools, was consistent across all four participants.

One noteworthy difference among the participants was that, compared to the Ontario principals, the Beijing principals positioned themselves higher than the teachers. For instance, besides the talk of collaboration and sharing, CPA also used hierarchical language to describe his role in PLCs: ‘I still played a very important role in the whole process to organize, induct, and direct [the teachers]’. CPB displayed a similar hierarchical view, as well as a passive attitude towards teachers’ responses:

[Teachers] can reflect their opinion through some other channels, for example, a guild. On the other hand, a policy should be accepted by everyone before being implemented. Thus, even the top-down policy needs to be clarified by principals. Besides, there is no reason to refuse teachers’ and team leaders’ reflections from the bottom-up.

By contrast, Ontario principals saw themselves as being closer to the teachers. OPA explained that, ‘from an administrator’s perspective, I am a teacher too. I think that people in my role have to remember that they are here not to just manage’. OPB identified herself as a ‘generalist’ and described her role in this way: ‘I have to be part of the PLC as well. Not the leader of it, but a part of it. My role as the principal is just [to] put the dates in and set the framework.’

Another difference between the Beijing and Ontario principals was their approach to standardised tests. In China, the most important standardised test, the college entrance examination (gaokao), decides students’ involvement in higher education, and it is recognised as a decisive competition for students. As CPB explained,

The Chinese educational context emphasizes the value that higher academic achievement leads to better job, higher economic status, and/or to be a higher official. So education is gathering more and more concerns, but these concerns are mainly on test scores and teachers’ teaching.

CPB noted that even though the Chinese system has been trying to implement process assessment for some time, it still lacks attention from teachers because ‘the students have to focus on testing’. By contrast, Ontario principals employed test results to inform collegial discussions. As OPA described,

We use the data from that [test]. That drives what we are doing, but it’s not the only driver for us. It’s just a piece of the puzzle [to show]: This is where we need to go. It is an important piece to give us ideas about where we are going.

OPB extended this perspective by positioning test data as a mechanism for developing professional capacity: ‘The test scores are measurable goals that get the collective work happening, and teachers then end up with tougher and higher learning and thinking.’ Whereas the Ontario principals used
test scores for multiple purposes, the Beijing principals kept the teachers’ focus on improving students’ test performance.

**Disagreement and Safe Climate**

The PLC concept assumes that positive effects can emerge from disagreements during professional reflection. In this research, all the participants expressed positive attitudes toward disagreement. For example, CPB noted that with the help of PLCs, he and his staff could change quarrels into collective support:

Disagreement is normal. It represents people’s serious attitude towards their researches. It is totally acceptable, because it is not conflict between people, but conversation and confrontation about certain questions. Disagreement deepens teachers’ cognition of professional knowledge and helps them understand some core concepts from various lenses.

According to CPB, the PLC provided opportunities for teachers to improve personal learning as well as to create collective learning based on similar research topics. OPB reported a similar situation among the teachers in her school:

I found even when teachers may not like each other personally, but putting that framework [the PLC] in and setting what the goal is, they are professional enough to work together for that common goal and set aside personal situations.

All four principals were concerned with developing a safe and open climate, as well as deepening teachers’ research and reflection. Academic achievement was the main focus of Beijing principals, and they introduced PLCs in order to organise teachers’ academic activities and to improve their engagement. CPA described his approach for motivating teachers’ participation:

By setting tasks for them, to let them do their own research, exploration, share with everyone, and then get positive reflections. After that, giving them a wider range of topics, so they feel their academic value is being recognized.

He noted that, ‘if the activity is structured on meaningful contents, the activity is valuable’, and he used the ‘target-share-motivation-new target’ circle to ensure that the activities were meaningful and motivational for the teachers. By building an equal and free academic climate, he resolved the tension of disagreements and achieved successful results. CPB also inspired teachers by supporting their academic research and result sharing, and both Beijing principals agreed that the PLC had improved the effectiveness and efficiency of research-based activities.

For OPA, creating a psychologically safe climate for teachers included releasing creative energy and improving relationships. OPA started by building an open environment so that teachers would get to know each other. She believed that a non-threatening PLC took the pressure off teachers, and ‘when I take the pressure off them, they become better at what they do’. She then moved the process forward by giving the teachers ownership over their collaborative work:

I don’t set the goals. We set it together. Because that is not only my project, I want it to be theirs...It can’t come from just me because who am I to say: this should be the goal.

She reported that the professional discussions had improved because the teachers had to be reflective during collaboration in order to achieve a collective goal. OPB agreed that good personal relationships improved teachers’ professional reflections and cultivated their ability to recognize and understand problems from various angles.
An interesting finding emerged from the participants’ beliefs of the teachers’ professional qualities. In answering how teachers in their schools cope with disagreement, all principals observed that the teachers were professional enough to differentiate academic disputes from personal ones. The principals did not have to remind teachers about the attitude of respect, and they could capitalise on differences of opinion to develop greater professional capacity for the teachers.

**Leadership and Decision-Making**

All participants noted that, although their leadership and decision-making style was shaped by the larger educational system in which they worked, the presence of the PLC had affected how they functioned as school administrators. For example, CPA described that, because of the PLC, he had changed his leadership to let teachers organise their own academic research. He said, ‘I am not advocating administrative stuff, but the academic freedom of speech. Everyone is equal.’ He went on to say that half of the teachers finally ‘did a good job’. CPB also observed that the PLC activities helped teachers become more sharing and conversational. CPA and CPB agreed that TRGs represented a top-down rather than a teacher-driven structure in Chinese schools. They saw the PLC as a similar idea to the TRG but with more teacher input, and they tried to implement it as an additional approach to strengthen TRGs. CPA described this as ‘reform some traditional methods without changing the agenda and spaces’. Both Beijing principals saw the TRG as providing a useful structure whereas the PLC generated ‘more effective’, ‘more systematic’ and ‘more emotional’ professional collaboration. Generally, they applied PLCs to strengthen the content and the pattern of activities in order to counteract the side effects of the administrative nature of TRGs. However, the Beijing principals did not mention that the PLC engaged teachers in decision-making processes that went beyond pedagogical skills.

By contrast, without a sophisticated existing structure, the Ontario principals faced serious implementation challenges. OPB, for example, explained that, ‘finding the time is the hardest part of applying PLCs to the school’, and OPA experienced similar time issues. Both Ontario principals found creative ways to embed PLC activities into the teachers’ daily work, but finding sufficient time and appropriate structures continued to bother them. In another contrast, the Ontario principals applied the PLC as the framework to involve the teaching staff in school-wide decision-making processes and to develop their own vision and goals. OPA highlighted that the PLC should not be hierarchical because of the need for flexibility and input. She said, ‘[t]he PLC we have is not always structured. One session might just be to wrap up something that they are doing, or they want to investigate something else. It’s pretty open-ended.’ Similarly, OPB encouraged teachers to make various decisions, including their own direction, strategies and needs, deadlines and structure.

In further discussions, principals OPA and OPB emphasised the close connection between teachers’ empowerment and the consistency of the PLC. OPB noted that in other schools she had done most of the work to develop PLCs, ‘but I knew when I walked away, it was over. That’s not the way it should be because it should be sustaining.’ Similarly, OPA remembered that the PLC was not sustained when she left a school. However, it worked very well in the school where she was now working. The difference, she said, is that, ‘[the teachers] are very keen to carry on. And that is really the important piece’ because ‘they believe in it and they see the value in it and they want to continue whether I am here or not’.

**Discussion**

The characteristics of successful leaders for PLCs have been a longstanding consideration in the research literature. For example, Hord (1997, as cited in Seo & Han 2012) and DuFour & Eaker
(1998) argue that leaders in a PLC should aim to improve teachers’ practice and to encourage their leadership. These characteristics were evident across the participants, but the focus was different for the two groups. The Beijing principals concentrated more on improving teachers’ pedagogic practice and were not as concerned with encouraging teacher leadership, whereas the Ontario principals wanted teachers to participate in leadership activities so that they could define and achieve their own improvement goals. In essence, the Beijing principals worked on building the first two domains of professional capital identified by Hargreaves & Fullan (2012). They built intellectual capital by leading the teachers to deepen their professional knowledge and skills, and they built social capital by bringing teachers together for professional conversations and collaborative research. The Ontario principals additionally worked on building Hargreaves & Fullan’s third domain of decisional capital by empowering teachers to make discretionary judgements about professional goals, purposes and practices. By contrast, the Beijing principals retained a hierarchical approach to decision-making processes in their schools. This finding can be partly explained by the greater levels of hierarchy and authoritarian leadership in the Chinese educational system than in the Canadian system. It appears that, although all participants found value in hearing teachers’ voices, the actual decision-making process was shaped by the nature of the larger system. Under these circumstances, the PLC might be located in a paradox in that it both breaks down and consolidates parts of the hierarchical system.

Another impact of the larger system has to do with the provision of frameworks and practical guides to support the work of a PLC. Lieberman et al. (2014) observe that ‘teachers in professional learning communities face several challenges, among them establishing time and structures for their learning’ (p. 12). This concern was borne out in this study. The Ontario principals, with no pre-existing structure, struggled with the implementation plan, whereas the Beijing principals relied on the structure of the TRG to implement PLC activities. In their case, the administrative activities in TRGs were transformed into teachers’ spontaneous or semi-spontaneous collective learning activities. From this perspective, since the PLCs motivated the Chinese teachers’ independence in initiating, organising and accomplishing learning goals, they had successfully developed collaborative skills and practices. Unfortunately, considering that the mechanism was still centred on classroom teaching, these efforts could be regarded as both the creation and limitation of personal capacity.

The focus on classroom practice in the interviews with Beijing principals supports the claim in the literature (e.g. Sargent & Hannum 2009; So et al. 2010; Seo & Han 2012) that Asian schools regard high performance in standardised tests as the main school improvement goal. According to Hursh (2007), focusing on the outcome of standardised tests manipulates education into being dominated by test-oriented teaching, and this concern was evident in the Beijing principals’ emphasis on the tight connection between academic performance and future social economic status. Despite having recognised the value of teacher collaboration, the Beijing principals had not challenged the traditional focus on test results. This adherence to prescriptive purposes of professional learning represents a barrier to the comprehensive development of students and to the development of teacher capacity beyond explicit classroom practice. However, that these principals had taken some steps toward transforming their administrative identities is remarkable when one considers the cultural and professional pressures exerted by the test-oriented educational system within which they worked.

Mitchell & Sackney (2011) argue that explicit professional knowledge can be extended by deep understanding and reflection that taps into the implicit knowledge on which teachers rely in their daily work. For the most part, the PLC activities reported by the Beijing principals focused on
teachers’ explicit knowledge, but the findings related to disagreement suggest a mechanism for moving professional learning into deeper spaces. Specifically, all participants shared the belief that disagreement deepened teachers’ professional cognition and gave them access to knowledge they might not have developed on their own. Senge (2006) has argued that this kind of reflective conversation can produce discomfort, and the participants were aware of, but not frightened by, this possibility. They wanted to foster collective learning and teacher research with the help of the PLC, and they worked at providing a safe climate within which the teachers could improve their personal and interpersonal capacity, as recommended by Mitchell & Sackney (2011).

From this perspective, it is worth questioning whether the harmonious cultural tradition in the Chinese community can be regarded as equal to a safe climate where deep reflection can grow. Although the Beijing principals mentioned that the PLC had reinforced their concern for teachers’ emotions and learning through collaboration and conversation, the students’ academic achievement still shaped the purpose of their PLCs. It is reasonable to assume that a hierarchical mechanism that is supported by an existing structure such as a TRG will support the dominant organisational purpose, and therefore align teachers’ personal learning and interpersonal relationships as well as administrators’ leadership style with that purpose. Walker’s (2007) reminder that Chinese people strive to please their superiors sheds interesting light on the Beijing principals’ failure to involve teachers in school decision-making or to challenge the dominance of test results. However, the wish to please superiors is not limited to Asian communities. Thus, how to offset the limiting impact of a desire for harmony and acceptance (Xu 2013) might become a challenge for principals in both Asian and Western schools.

Findings from the Ontario principals confirm Mitchell & Sackney’s (2011) idea that PLCs should help people to realise the gaps between current and desired realities and to create effective approaches to narrow the gaps. However, as Dimmock (2012) observes, what the ‘desired reality’ looks like is largely determined by the nature of the educational context. This idea helps to explain the different attitudes to test results between the Beijing and Ontario principals. Whereas the Beijing principals were centrally concerned with test scores, the Ontario principals recognised test results as important data but saw them only as snapshots of accountability. And whereas the Beijing principals saw test results as the measurement of the teachers’ performances, the Ontario principals used test data as guidance to design educational goals with the teachers; these clear and collective goals then bound and drove the teachers forward. In this way, the tests served as dynamics of improvements instead of the primary purpose and pressure point of education.

Implications of the Study

The theory of the PLC is an ideal model of how to transform schools from the old pattern of managed systems into living systems in the context of a rapidly changing world (Mitchell & Sackney 2009). However, it is rooted in the Western educational system, which is different from the Chinese system, and Wheatley (2005) notes that the direct transfer of an initiative from one context to another is seldom successful. She adds, however, that the stories of what has worked in one place can serve as inspiration in another. The results of this study suggest some ways in which educators in Western and Asian school systems can learn from one another.

Western principals can learn the value of paying attention to the structure and consistency of the PLCs they build. In China, TRGs and the national tradition of harmonious community have laid down the mechanisms of regular meeting, effective collective work and focused decision-making for principals. By contrast, the Ontario principals had to build their PLCs from scratch, which
raises questions about immediate implementation as well as long-term sustainability. That is, if individual principals have to develop their own systems, it is questionable how long the system will last once they leave the school. Thus, the lessons from the Chinese context imply that strategies of sustainability should be regarded as key components of PLC development.

Second, Chinese principals can learn the value of expanding teachers’ capacity beyond pedagogical practice aimed at academic performance. In their Ontario schools, the principals opened the door for teachers to exercise greater control over the directions in which the school should move, the improvement goals they could and should attain, and the structures that would help them move in that direction. This level of autonomy engaged their creative energy and released the professional spirit. By contrast, the Beijing principals had to take extra measures to motivate teachers. Although concern over test results is driven largely by the external pressure of standardised tests, school principals do not need to be captives of that model. Although they must still function within a hierarchical system, they can adopt a less authoritarian leadership style and a broader definition of professional capacity.

Leaders and policy-makers in the larger system also have lessons to learn. First, policy-makers should bear in mind that accountability cannot be measured by the isolated snapshots of test scores. Educators require more support to develop the understanding and practice of how to help students to be better people rather than better test machines. It is a key responsibility of policy-makers to help transform education from a test-oriented pattern into a student-oriented pattern. Second, educational leaders should recognise that schools need support for developing effective PLCs. This support can include building professional learning time into the school day, creating common structures for the implementation of PLCs, and developing strategies for effective collaborative work and learning.

The notion of the PLC has emerged in an educational climate with a democratic background. By contrast, a hierarchical and test-oriented structure exists widely in educational systems around the world. Some Chinese scholars and educators might question whether, if the test-oriented context will not change in the near future, it is worthwhile to waste time on building teachers’ capacity other than for classroom teaching. In addition, in those cultures, like China, where educators and teachers do not have a Western background, the theory of the PLC will need to be adjusted to cope with the local context. The approach that Chinese scholars and educators take in introducing a PLC can provide a new lens for Western scholars to develop the theory.

Ideally, a PLC works better in a distributed power system (Mitchell & Sackney 2011). However, Dimmock (2012) criticises leadership theories as suffering from ‘a form of cultural hegemony . . . where Anglo-American authors and scholars representing 7 per cent of the world population purport to speak for the other 93 per cent’ (p. 34). He extends this idea in his observation that ‘PLCs in Asia are likely to develop in more culturally sensitive ways, with each adapting to the boundaries of acceptability within existing power and influence relationships’ (p. 129). From this standpoint, it is a mistake to assume that the Western model of the PLC must be applied intact throughout the world. Rather, the ideal model should be seen as ‘inspiration, not solution’ (Wheatley 2005: 68), and people should select and configure the good practices from the model in culturally and educationally appropriate ways for their context. In situations where hierarchy is inevitable, Chinese educators’ efforts provide examples for how the PLC has been implemented in a top-down system and what kind of change it has fostered in the system. To that end, the comparative narratives and experiences of the Beijing and Ontario principals in this study provide diverse lenses with which scholars can review and adjust the existing theory of the PLC.
Conclusion

Few studies have compared the practical performance of PLCs across Western and Asian backgrounds. This research addressed that gap by exploring the interactions between the PLC and the educational culture into which it is introduced. The results of this study showed that in top-down and test-oriented structures, which are believed to be barriers to developing educators’ professional capacity, the PLC can, to some extent, both reinforce an existing hierarchical system and foster changes. In the narratives of the Beijing principals, principals applied PLCs into the TRGs and improved the effectiveness and efficiency of activities. In the narratives of the Ontario principals, the PLCs guided principals to distribute their power to staff members and motivated teachers’ spontaneous learning and research. These results show that principals can successfully confront the challenges of their existing system with the practices of the PLC. It is certain that the PLCs positively influenced the principals in both Beijing and Ontario, which proves their applicability in diverse educational backgrounds.

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Features of Effective Leadership Development Provision for Experienced New Zealand Principals

Howard Youngs and Carol Cardno

Abstract: This article reports knowledge gained from an evaluation of a nationwide leadership development initiative for experienced principals in New Zealand. The Experienced Principals Development Programme (EPDP) was piloted with 300 primary and secondary principals as part of the New Zealand government’s strategy to refresh and retain experienced school leaders. In spite of a highly positive reception by participants, the initiative was discontinued. However, the formal evaluation of the programme has contributed to the knowledge base on effective school leadership development. The article captures the perspectives of the providers of the programme, who pinpointed particular successful and challenging features. Overall, the findings point to the success of delivery modes with small cohorts that include clarity of expectations, timely initiation, the inclusion of internal and external coaching/mentoring partnerships, and context-related activity around school improvement. The learning from this study could inform the shape and delivery of similar programmes for experienced principals in other nations so that sufficient experience is maintained across the principalship.

Background

In New Zealand both the preparation and development of principals is optional. Optional development pathways for principals can usually be any one or a combination of an educational leadership postgraduate qualification, or the Ministry of Education’s aspiring and/or first-time principals programme. An Experienced Principals Development Programme (EPDP) was also established as part of a wider New Zealand government and Ministry of Education strategy to strengthen professional leadership in schools. The EPDP was a priority in the Ministry of Education’s 2009-2010 Professional Leadership Plan that aspired to create a cohesive approach to leadership development from middle leadership through to the differing stages of a school principal’s career. Already in place at the time were the programmes for aspiring principals (Piggot-Irvine & Youngs 2011) and first-time principals (Robinson, Irving, Eddy & Le Fevre 2008). The EPDP was intended to extend development provision to the experienced segment of school leaders, for whom no state-funded leadership development was available, in an effort to retain and revitalise this group.

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This nationwide development plan was part of the government’s response to school principal supply issues highlighted in the OECD’s school leadership report (Swaffield & MacBeath 2009) and reflective of the international trend of governments starting to recognise the key role of school leaders (Crow, Lumby & Pashiardis 2008). In New Zealand, the supply and retention issue also reflects the ageing population of school principals. In 2004, 8.74 per cent of school principals were aged 60 or over; by 2010 this had risen to 17.13 per cent and it has continued to rise using the latest figures available at the time of writing this article, reaching 21.5 per cent as of April 2012 (Ministry of Education 2015a). Most attention internationally in addressing this supply and retention issue has however been on aspiring principals; little attention has been given to retaining experienced principals so that nations do not experience a future dearth of human capital in the principalship through a wave of principal retirements (Marks 2012). The EPDP was therefore a strategic move to ensure school principalship remained an important aspect of New Zealand’s education system into the future.

The Experienced Principals Development Programme (EPDP) was piloted with 300 experienced principals and delivered by ten regional providers, who successfully contested for contracts to deliver the pilot from mid-2009 through to the end of 2010. Experienced principals in this case were those who had at least ten years of experience as a principal, so participants would generally be in mid- or late-career stages (Oplatka 2010). Changes in government policy and Ministry of Education priorities have since resulted in the removal of the Professional Leadership Plan from official websites, whilst initiatives for aspiring and first-time principals continue. Rather, the government and Ministry of Education are hoping experienced principals will contribute to the latest initiative, Communities of Schools (Ministry of Education 2014), as system leaders of ten or so schools who collaborate around an agreed goal with the Ministry of Education in the hope of raising student achievement. It is therefore unlikely the EPDP initiative will be resurrected anytime in the foreseeable future, in spite of the overall success of the pilot from the perspective of the participating principals (Cardno & Youngs 2013). In an earlier article that reports what principals deemed to be successful features of the programme, Cardno and Youngs assert that:

At the end of the programme principals confirmed that the programme had helped them to become more reflective about their practice and that in particular they were on the whole better equipped to identify and change the conditions that impact on teaching and learning because of the development activities they had engaged in. (2013: 264)

This article explores why the EPDP pilot was deemed to be a success from the perspective of the providers and the nature of the challenges they encountered. The participants’ perspectives are used to examine which features of provision were particularly effective. In it, we focus more on the providers than the principals, although both views are necessary to paint the overall picture. A brief overview of the literature on experienced principals’ development is presented followed by an explanation of the mixed methods evaluation research design we used. The findings are reported in two sections. The first focuses on the programme initiation challenges faced by the providers and the second focuses on the effective features of provision. The article then concludes with a discussion of the key features of leadership development provision that proved to be effective in this case.
Literature on the Development of Experienced Principals

Although the approaches taken by countries to professionalise educational leaders vary greatly, they fall into two marked categories: before and after appointment to principalship. Generally, principal preparation relates to strategies used to develop the capability of aspirants before they are appointed to principalship. Career progression and development strategies are involved after appointment (Macpherson 2010; Cardno 2003). The notion of leadership and management development applies to both pre- and post-appointment strategies and is intended to be ongoing throughout career stages ranging from the aspiring stage, to newly appointed principal stage, to the stage of being an experienced principal.

At the pre-employment stage, participants in leadership and management development are usually aspirants. In many cases, a university-based specialised qualification or completion of a national training programme is a pre-requisite for principalship, and this is certainly the case in the USA and the UK (Cardno 2003; Hallinger 2003; Notman 2010), though it is not so apparent in a comparative study of Commonwealth nations (Moorosi & Bush 2011). In other cases, programmes for aspiring principals have been developed which involve participants volunteering or being selected (Piggot-Irvine & Youngs 2012; Robertson & Earl 2014). Newly appointed principals are in many systems inducted into the role, though this is not always a mandatory requirement (Robinson et al. 2008; Moorosi & Bush 2011). There is acknowledgement in a comparative analysis of European nations that challenges can exist in trying to balance supply and demand through programmes (Møller & Schratz 2008). Catering for experienced principals is also where many of the challenges associated with appropriate and effective ongoing leadership and management development are encountered (Cardno & Fitzgerald 2005; Dempster, Alen, & Gatehouse 2009; Marks 2012).

Experienced leaders are defined in several ways. For example, in generic writings about leader development, Day (2011) alludes to the ten-year role tenure associated with developing expert performance, and Lord & Hall (2005) argue that leaders’ identities tend to have more of a collective orientation, rather than an individual one, as their expertise and experience develops. This implies knowledge related to leader development would be different for a beginning principal compared to an experienced one, and cannot be restricted to new education reforms. Experienced school principals are normally well established in their careers, have at least a decade of experience in principalship, and many have held several such posts. Some of these incumbents are also late-career principals or aged over 55 years (Oplatka 2010). Literature referring to the ongoing development of this profile of leaders is scant, although there is some reference to a lack of attention paid to the needs of these experienced principals (Scott & Rarieya 2011; Marks 2012). In relation to educational settings, Ribbins (1999) argues for an approach that ‘makes available continuing professional development at every career phase’ (p. 87). He suggests an incumbent goes through an immediate period of initiation, a later phase of development and growth, a stage of autonomy where they are more prepared to collaborate with and trust others, and then a period of disenchantment, although this is not universal by any means, and long-serving principals can remain enchanted with the job (Oplatka 2010). Ribbins (1999) asserts that an understanding of these characteristics of transition for school leaders is essential to generate an appropriate strategic response to their developmental needs. This is similar to the conclusions drawn by Dempster et al. (2009) in a study of Australian principal development. In their view, leaders need different areas of knowledge to be developed at different career stages and in particular, experienced and long-serving principals need attention paid to the personal and relational capabilities that will help them deal with complexity and sustain them over extended service. Furthermore, the individual and differing development needs of an experienced leader require some degree of differentiation due to the complex interaction of social
and cultural capital accumulated in their respective schools over many years (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm & McKee 2014; Youngs 2014).

**Leadership Learning Approaches for Experienced Principals**

Empirical research about the actual needs and modes of delivery preferred by experienced principals is limited (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom 2004; Stroud 2006). Research conducted with experienced primary and secondary headteachers in the UK affirms a critical need for experienced headteacher development, and concludes there should be a unique approach to the way professional development is provided for at this career stage. In Stroud’s (2006) study, school leaders felt they were in need of revitalising and re-enthusing and that they should play a significant part in decision-making about the sort of interventions for professional growth they participated in. In particular, they felt that diverse needs might be met through coaching and a wide selection of other opportunities. Both coaching/mentoring and individual assessment of capability have a place in personalising development programmes, and these strategies could serve well in programmes that cater for a range of experienced principal capabilities (Solansky 2010). Similarly, there is evidence of the effective employment of coaching and mentoring in principal preparation and the early career stages of principal development (Barnett & O’Mahony 2008; Robinson et al. 2008), but a dearth of literature about the employment of these personalised methods in relation to the development of experienced principals. One exception is a report of an Australian initiative to partner experienced principals with trained coaches (O’Mahony & Barnett 2008). This research concludes that careful planning and support is needed in this kind of provision, which hinges on the capability and credibility of the coaches and the establishment of sustainable trusting relationships between principals and coaches. This theme is also echoed by others (see, for example, Reiss 2007; Barnett & O’Mahony 2008; Robertson 2008). Key advantages of leadership coaching proposed in the literature relate to the flexibility of this process and its focus on achieving a meshing of both individual and organisational goals (Ely, Boyce, Nelson, Zaccaro, Hernez-Broome & Whyman 2010).

The issue of sustainable leadership relates to long-serving principals in particular because sustaining interest and enthusiasm in the role is a constant concern (Stroud 2006). Professional renewal is fundamental to the success of programmes for experienced principals and is consistent with the principle of ‘challenge’ suggested as an essential development element (Van Velsor, McCauley, & Ruderman 2010). The challenge should be of an intellectual nature (Cardno & Fitzgerald 2005; Dempster et al. 2009), developing cognitive and metacognitive skills that enable participants to engage in the theory and practice of critical inquiry to build self and management capability, which are the foundations of emotional intelligence (Goleman 1998). Leader development is likely to be more effective and sustaining if it is recognised as a ‘highly individualised process’ (Day: 42). In this regard, there are several processes that increase self-awareness and support self-development, including feedback and learning goals.

The literature is consistent in advocating for context-based learning as a powerful developmental tool for the experienced leader (Day 2011; Moorosi & Bush 2011). Bush (2008) proposes a 21st century model of leadership learning that is context-responsive and team oriented. This aligns with the notion of embedding school improvement initiatives in leadership development opportunities – a form of authentic on-the-job development (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom 2004). When principals learn to be critically reflective about the status quo and plan incremental improvement, they can engage in authentic learning through projects involving action learning or action research (Day 2011) related to school-wide reform and improvement initiatives. This school
improvement context for leadership development also serves to provide opportunities for drawing others into the professional learning experience so that both leader and leadership development are possible (Cardno & Youngs 2013).

Research Evaluation Design
The Experienced Principals Development Programme was designed to allow each of the ten regional providers to select their preferred programme delivery mode and cohort size. The evaluation of the programme involved looking at the whole programme as an entity and separately evaluating unique settings of regional provision. The variety of contexts required a multi-level approach where both a national and a regional view could be gained. Owing to the number of principals involved in the programme and the requirement to provide overall evaluative findings, the design required a data-collecting tool that suited quantitative analysis. At a national level, the plan to conduct interviews with regional provider co-ordinators required an approach that suited qualitative analysis. Complementary to the national level, data-collecting tools were also required at the regional level so that principal’s perspectives, as individuals and group members, could be gained mainly through qualitative analysis.

Another component that informed the evaluation design was our intention to provide formative feedback to the regional providers and the Ministry of Education throughout the evaluation period, as well as reporting summative findings. Hence a mixed methods and multi-phased research design was needed. The multiphase triangulation design developed by Youngs & Piggot-Irvine (2012) for the evaluation a New Zealand leadership development programme for aspiring principals was adapted and used as the foundation of this evaluation design because of its ‘goodness of fit’ to the evaluation criteria for the EPDP.

Evaluation occurred at three levels and in three phases. Levels one and two were designed to gather data related to the overall national findings and level three was designed in parallel to provide insights into what was occurring with a selection of regional providers. Overall principal perceptions were collected through questionnaires at level one, whereas overall regional provider co-ordinator perceptions were collected through interviews at level two and were complemented with a document analysis of espoused provider programmes. The evaluation was spread over three phases: the provider programme initiation phase, an expected programme delivery mid-point phase and a programme end-point phase (see Figure 1).
Figure 1: Experienced Principals Development Programme - phases of evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase I</th>
<th>Phase II</th>
<th>Phase III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NATIONAL Level 2: QUAL interviews document analysis</td>
<td>NATIONAL Level 1: QUAN Questionnaire Q1</td>
<td>NATIONAL Level 1: QUAN Questionnaire Q2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATIONAL Level 2: QUAL interviews</td>
<td>NATIONAL Level 2: QUAL interviews</td>
<td>NATIONAL Level 2: QUAL interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REGIONAL CASE STUDIES (3) Level 3: QUAL Focus groups Observations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings Part One: Programme Initiation

The overall Ministry of Education aim for the Experienced Principals Development Programme (EPDP) was to develop the capability of experienced principals to lead change in order to create the conditions for effective teaching and learning for every student. This aim was evident in the provider plans submitted to the Ministry of Education. There was an emphasis on both managing change and improving teaching and learning. A unique feature of the programme design was the flexibility of delivery – allowing providers to propose a mode and cohort details for each site. This provided a variety of very different types of programme across the regions. However, the Ministry of Education required that some common components feature in every programme. Firstly, each principal and their respective school were required to complete an Effective Leadership Practice (ELP) survey that was administered through a national research body. The purpose of the ELP was to provide some indication to the principal and their provider about individual leadership development needs. A second demand that needed to be met by both providers and participants was related to the expectation that principals and provider would engage in relevant e-learning activity to enhance communication and development. The third requirement related to the Ministry of Education insisting that the programme be used to disseminate key strategic and policy documents relevant to the principal’s role.

To achieve their plans, nearly all providers provided opportunities for their cohort of principals to come formally together, usually for seminar-type sessions. The use of Professional Learning Groups (PLGs) was widespread throughout the providers’ plans, as was the use of mentors/coaches. Some providers provided formal training to PLG coaches, whereas others matched principals with less experience with those who had greater experience and could act as critical friends. Face-to-face components were complemented with a range of online tools such as wikis, learning portals, Moodle and online forums. The most common and consistent feature of provision across programmes was
the expectation that all principals carry out an inquiry project in their school as a means of blending their own leadership development with aspects of school improvement where the focus was on improving the conditions for teaching and learning. The programme evaluation confirms the most significant finding in terms of expanding and sustaining principals’ own development and extending development to others related to the impact of the school improvement inquiry projects (for further details, see Cardno & Youngs 2013).

**Recruitment**

Principals were either recruited for the EPDP directly by a regional provider or became aware of the programme through Ministry of Education communication, advertising or their own professional networks. Just over half the principals had heard directly from a local regional provider and their responses to programme effectiveness rating scale questions were compared to principals who had not heard through a local provider. For 14 of the 47 rating scale questions, t-tests showed principals who were contacted directly by a provider rated their responses higher than those who heard otherwise. This finding, though not conclusive, when viewed alongside other data collected through our evaluation suggested that if a relationship did exist between the provider and the principal prior to the programme’s start, then those principals were more likely to rate aspects of the EPDP higher compared to those who had not encountered the provider before.

Some providers indicated that in hindsight they would make changes to their recruitment process if they had the opportunity to establish another cohort. In particular, they would provide clearer guidelines on what was expected of principals and check the principals’ understandings of what they were committing themselves to regarding participation. Providers offered the following sort of comments:

- We would probably take time out to interview principals. What is it that they want to get out of it? It is clear to us, it is probably a relatively small number but probably 10 per cent came in to this simply because it was on offer. They actually had no idea, they weren’t too concerned about what it was and they found it very demanding, very demanding indeed. (Provider B)

- I would want a greater early, formal commitment from the principal to meet with other people on a regular basis. (Provider C)

- We would be making it really clear that this is a piece of PD [professional development] that does have high expectations of them in terms of participation and what they are actually going to do ... it came as a bit of a shock to some that they actually had to do some things in terms of expectations and that there were high expectations that they would actually do something quite different in their schools. (Provider A)

**Challenges Faced by Providers**

Across providers there was a strong view that during the early months of programme delivery, a setback to the provision of programme activity occurred because of the delayed administration of the Effective Leadership Practice (ELP) survey. Even though the survey was later deemed to be a success by providers and principals, it was still in its pilot testing phase at the start of the EPDP. The delayed release of Ministry of Education documents was another frustrating issue for providers. For example, the public release of a key initiative document, the School Leadership and Student Outcomes Best Evidence Synthesis (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd 2009), was not timed for release prior to the start of the programme. Though providers did have a draft version, they still had to wait another
three months for the public release. As a consequence, some providers found that throughout the first few months they were still grappling with establishing for principals the alignment between the purpose of the EPDP and multiple Ministry of Education publications. In the case study of one regional provider, both observation and focus group data confirmed the participants were unaware of the importance of a focus on government initiatives as an expectation for the programme. No one disagreed with the expressed view that principals are, or should be, aware of government initiatives, but several commented they would have preferred to have been made aware of this from the outset. The issue for participants appeared to be the extent to which providers should make themselves aware of Ministry of Education agendas or ‘official’ expectations in relation to the invitation to participate in ‘free’ professional development funded by a government.

There was a perception from two out of the ten providers, in particular, that time was wasted at the start of the programme. Another factor that hindered timely programme delivery was related to the e-learning expectations and what may have been assumed about principals’ knowledge of digital learning environments. One provider stated:

> I think, it seems to me that the, the technical capabilities of a number of the participants are not strong. So, where we had hoped to do a lot of the work online, and with some of the web-two tools and so on, it seems to me now that we’re going to be moving, working more face to face. I’m not sure that we’re not going to get the proficiency with some of the web2 tools that we would have hoped for. There are some enthusiasts and some experts in the group who will go down that track, but I would say that certainly won’t happen across the whole cluster. (Provider D)

### Findings Part Two: Perceptions of Effective Delivery Modes

In general, the programme became more relevant and effective for the principals as it progressed over time and as providers made adjustments based on formative feedback. A sample of principals we had been able to track individually and anonymously across the mid- and end-points of the programme revealed some shifts had taken place to cater for their preferred learning styles and leadership development needs. These shifts are displayed in Table 1 (where 0=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree).

Table 2 presents the specific impact, according to the principals, of different tools of learning used in the EPDP to enhance their leadership and development (in rank order of rating means).
Table 1: Principals’ perceptions of shifts in relevancy of the programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Q1 Mar 2010</th>
<th>Q2 Oct 2010</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principals’ preferred range of learning styles were catered for</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>0.212</td>
<td>Small effect size implying that some principals preferred learning styles may have been better catered for as the EPDP progressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The EPDP was highly relevant in relation to principals’ leadership and management development</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>0.083</td>
<td>Very small effect size implying there was some possible very small improvement with the EPDP being relevant to principals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Principals’ ratings of possible sources of development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other EPDP principals</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider personnel expertise</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors/coaches (or equivalent)</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional readings</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop/teaching sessions</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>3.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility of Provider personnel</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>3.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLGs/PLCs (or equivalent)</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>3.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest presenters</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilising the ELP data</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider diagnostic tools</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>3.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting other schools</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>3.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Inquiry) Project</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e-learning</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portfolios</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The findings related to Table 2 revealed that principals regarded the relational face-to-face contexts as the most appropriate for their continued leadership development. Two sources of development that appeared to be less affected by how the provider delivered the programme were the relationships principals established with other EPDP principals, and professional readings.

Professional learning groups, often facilitated by a mentor, were the cornerstone of delivery. The end-point questionnaire revealed the principals with one provider, when compared to the other providers, had possibly experienced PLGs and mentors/coaches as more substantial factors to their leadership development. This provider (Provider G) ensured the PLG coaches were appropriately trained prior to the PLGs being implemented. Another provider stressed how the PLGs took time to work effectively:

In April we noticed that the type of discussion and the openness in the discussion changed. They became far more trusting it seemed of each other because we’d talked through the protocols for discussion in the group. We have a process that you can talk about to other people what we were discussing but there’d be no names and no identification of who might’ve said the various things. So we had to establish this whole idea of trust and we felt this was critical to the culture of the group, that they could be open in their discussion.

(Provider H)

In the end-point questionnaire, principals working with Provider H rated other EPDP principals from the same cohort as a programme component that contributed more to their development than other aspects of the programme such as workshops, the ELP, inquiry projects, PLGs and mentors. This provider described in an interview how principals had developed ‘activities and exercises around what it meant to be a critical friend’.

Another variable that appeared to make a difference to principals’ perceptions was the size of the cohort their provider had set in place. A comparison of the two larger cohorts with all of the small cohorts suggested that cohort size may be a factor that contributes to how principals rated their satisfaction and learning in the EPDP. Of the 47 scale items of the end-point questionnaire, the responses of the principals from the smaller cohorts (n=15-25) rated statistically significantly higher for 36 of the rating scale means compared to principals from the two large cohorts (n=60+). A similar trend was also evident with the mid-point questionnaire data, suggesting that there comes a point where the overall group size starts to work against the professional learning environment of workshops when the whole cohort is expected to attend. Principals working with the two larger providers preferred a 30-40 per cent lower maximum size for the overall group than what they experienced, and preferred the minimum size to be at least 20. Principals working with providers with smaller cohorts generally preferred the cohort sizes to be between 10 and 25, similar to what they had experienced.

Discussion

One of the most effective features in programmes for developing experienced principals is the inclusion of an inquiry project related to developing an initiative or resolving a school problem. Overall, the ten (very varied) regional programmes contributed to developing the capability of experienced principals. Where providers had assisted principals to make the necessary connections to their goals for school improvement through a manageable inquiry project, principals’ capability to lead change was more likely to be enhanced (Cardno & Youngs 2013). This finding is aligned to Bush’s (2008) argument that relevant leadership development requires work-based learning.
When learning occurs in a context that is authentic and linked to a project, its impact is likely to be effective and sustainable (Day 2011).

Second, overall the findings indicated that all varieties of the programme were at least moderately successful in the view of the participants, but a small cohort was a distinct feature of success. Smaller cohorts of under 25 participants were able to develop closer relationships with providers and amongst the participants. Face-to-face learning encounters that built relationships were seen to be extremely effective by the participants. We know that principals in this study rated learning from other colleagues on the programme, learning from provider expertise and learning through coaching/mentoring very highly as sources of development. Asynchronous delivery of online modes was only effective if a principal had sufficient digital expertise and made time to become engaged.

A third feature of effectiveness is captured in participants’ comments about the impact of working in small collegial groups (such as Professional Learning Groups) with appropriate coaching support. This was particularly the case when a small group of principals was in regular contact with the coach/mentor/facilitator, who also maintained contact with each individual principal. This confirms that coaching/mentoring has a core place in leadership development (Solansky 2010) and that careful planning and support is required for this kind of provision, which hinges heavily on the expertise of the coaches/mentors (Reiss 2007; O’Mahony & Barnett 2008; Robertson 2008).

A fourth feature of programme success is the capability of the provider to get the programme ‘off the ground’ as quickly as possible in spite of difficulties created in the delivery pipeline. In this national initiative all ten providers were hampered by delays affecting document availability and the administration of a pilot needs analysis survey, but some were able to surmount these difficulties. Smaller cohorts were possibly able to be more responsive to local needs, and this is reflected in the overall satisfaction of their participants.

As part of the end-point questionnaire, principals were asked to rate the overall impact of the EPDP in relation to their desire to continue as a principal. Their responses can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Principals’ perceptions of the overall impact of the EPDP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Since being part of the EPDP principals are more likely to continue in their role</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>1.495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The EPDP has provided rejuvenation for principals</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>1.587</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These responses indicated that the EPDP did have some impact in increasing the likelihood that a number of experienced principals would stay longer in their role. This in itself pointed to the success of the EPDP pilot, especially given the issues of supply of principals and future retirement that pervade the educational environment. The slightly lower rating of rejuvenation could possibly have been related to the busy lives of principals, who participated in the EPDP as well as carrying out their roles in their schools. Other evaluation findings did, however, suggest that rejuvenation through the EPDP could possibly have been associated with increased reflective practice linked to attempting to enhance the conditions of effective teaching and learning by the principal in their school. One principal summed up their thoughts of the EPDP pilot by stating:
I know that New Zealand is facing a problem of a lot of principals leaving, maybe going to rural schools and then burning out, or getting into situations and being completely left alone… I can see this programme possibly saving some principals and keeping them in their positions for a lot longer.

Despite the positive views of most of those involved in the EPDP, and our own recommendation as the evaluators that the EPDP should continue, albeit with minor changes, the programme has never been run again. Instead, the Ministry of Education has moved on to a more generic approach in which any development for experienced principals is indirectly wrapped up within government reforms of education. The most recent Statement of Intent, spanning the period 2014-18, identifies raising the quality of leadership as a strategic priority (Ministry of Education 2014), but is somewhat silent on any dedicated leader development programme for experienced school principals.

**Conclusion**

A key learning from this evaluation of a nationwide initiative in experienced principal development is that varied modes of delivery – some of which include face-to-face opportunities amongst experienced principals – are necessary. In summary, using cohorts of 10-20 participants, clarifying expectations at the outset, providing support through coaching in small groups, engaging participants in a school-based inquiry project and getting off to a timely start are some of the features that lead to programme delivery successes. Providing intentional space for collaboration and networking amongst experienced principals is essential, though care is needed to ensure principals have both the time and skills to engage in any online asynchronous activity.

These findings align in some way with a comparative analysis of Canada, Kenya and Tanzania as part of the International Study of the Preparation of Principals (ISPP) project. Scott and Rarieya (2011) found that delivery needed to be both flexible and multi-modal, with any online component best delivered in an asynchronous manner. However, the discontinuation of the EPDP after its successful pilot does raise questions as to whether enough is being done in New Zealand to alleviate any possible future shortage of experienced principals. Whether the recent Communities of Schools initiative (Ministry of Education 2015b) is sufficient as a strategy to complement the aspirant and first-time principal programmes is still an unknown. The key is whether governments are doing enough to ensure that, in the years ahead, there is no drop-off in human, social and cultural capital of experienced principals in their education systems, even if the pipeline of aspirants will be sufficient to ensure every school has a principal.

**References**


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Teaching Underprivileged Students with a Soul: Insights into Emotional Leadership in Underprivileged Communities

Izhar Oplatka

Abstract: The purpose of the current study is to explore the emotional relationships between teachers who were appointed to guide and provide consultation to underprivileged students in a special improvement and support programme given by an external agency (Pitchon Lev) and the local Ministry of Education, and their students. Based on semi-structured interviews with 15 graduates, it was found that the guide-student relations are embedded with many positive emotions. This, in turn, intensified the climate of trust in the class, increased student achievement and self-growth, and led to mutual emotional commitments in the class. Some insights into emotional leadership in our schools are offered.

Introduction

Educational researchers worldwide have sought to investigate emotions and forms of emotional display among teachers (e.g. Hargreaves 2000; Zembylas 2004; O'Connor 2008; Meyer 2009; Day & Lee 2011; Oplatka 2012) and educational leaders (Yamamoto, Gardiner & Tenuto 2014). Among the issues considered in this research are educational change and teachers’ emotions (Lee & Yin 2011), teachers’ emotions and teachers’ beliefs (e.g. Zembylas, Charalambous, Charalambous & Kendeou 2011), teacher-student emotional engagements (Mazer, McKenna-Buchanan, Quinlan & Titsworth 2014), and the expression of a wide variety of emotions in teaching, such as guilt (Hargreaves 2000; Yin & Lee 2012), anger (Liljestrom, Roulston & Demarrais 2007) and compassion (Oplatka 2007). Where there has been considerable interest in the subject of teachers’ emotions in mainstream schools, little research has concentrated directly on emotions embedded in the relationships between teachers and their at-risk students. The purpose of the current study was, then, to explore the emotional relationships between teachers who were appointed to guide and consult underprivileged students in a special improvement and support programme given by an external agency (Pitchon Lev) and the local Ministry of Education, and their students. More specifically, the study sought to understand the perceived influences of these relationships upon the students’ achievements in final tests and their self growth.

The understanding of the role of emotions in the class towards underprivileged students may draw attention to the need for educational leaders in all schools – let alone those in schools that serve a large portion of at-risk students – to acknowledge the importance of teachers’ emotions to student
achievement and development. Likewise, telling the story of the teacher-guide in a special class for underprivileged students in this article will demonstrate the complex nature of teacher-student relationships, and the need to recruit teachers who are fully aware of their emotional role in the lives of their underprivileged, sometimes at-risk students.

**Teachers’ Emotions and Underprivileged Students**

Teachers’ discussions of their work immediately reveal that emotions are at the heart of teaching (Kelchtermans 2011), a profession that is charged with positive emotions according to Hargreaves (2000). Research on teachers’ emotions has indicated that teachers can experience positive emotions of joy, happiness, hope, love, compassion, wonder and excitement when they feel committed to their vocation, as well as a sense of well-being (Zembylas 2004; Samier & Schmidt 2009). In contrast, however, they may experience negative emotions such as guilt, shame, envy, jealousy, frustration, disappointment, disillusion, powerlessness, anxiety, anger, fear embarrassment, frustration, vulnerability and sadness when threatened by a new reform or if they receive negative feedback (Nias 1999; Hargreaves 2000; Kelchtermans 2011). These emotions play an important role in teachers’ relationships with their students (Nias 1989).

Teachers’ emotions have been found to be linked to many variables, including well-being, identity, teacher-student relationships, emotional management, career stages, mentoring, student misbehaviour, teaching quality and supportive attitudes (Meyer 2009; Day & Lee 2011). For example, anger can result from teachers feeling that they are being impeded in carrying out their moral purposes (Liljestrom et al. 2007), and vulnerability affects their job satisfaction and the quality of their professional performance (Kelchtermans 2011).

The capacity of teachers to display a certain emotion in their work is not just a matter of personal disposition, but also of cultural influences (Nias 1999; Hargreaves, 2000; Zembylas 2004), such as the culture of the teaching profession. In fact, teachers’ emotions are embedded in particular social, cultural and political structures (Day & Lee 2011). Zembylas et al. (2011) claimed that emotions are neither strictly private nor merely the effects, or peripheral by-products, of exterior social structures, but rather should be seen as a socio-culturally constituted public space that also functions as a constitutive force for (trans)forming individuals, social interactions and power relationships. For example, Chinese teachers think emotion is a core part of a teacher’s work and that teaching contains a significant component of ‘heart-consuming’ labour (‘coaxin’), meaning that teachers consider themselves the ‘mother’ of their students. In their view, teachers should be passionately committed to their work, should hide negative emotions while at the same time maintaining positive emotions, and should instrumentalise emotions to achieve teaching goals (Yin & Lee 2012). Teachers’ emotions are thus socially constructed and influenced by local emotion rules and cultures.

A major stream of study refers to care and caring in teaching. Caring has been explored in terms of teachers’ relationships with their students being personal rather than impersonal and bureaucratic (Noddings 1992; Nias 1999). For Noddings (1992), caring involves the establishment of meaningful relationships, the ability to sustain connections and the commitment to respond to others with sensitivity and flexibility. In classroom teaching, caring takes the shape of encouraging dialogue, exhibiting sensitivity to students’ needs and interests, and providing rich and meaningful materials and activities, among other responsive pedagogical strategies. O’Connor (2008) found that caring for and caring about students was an important part of the teachers’ work in her study, and
frequently acted as both a motivation to continue teaching and a ‘terribly exhausting’ professional demand (p. 122).

Only very few studies have explored the issue of teachers’ emotions specifically in schools or classes serving a high-poverty population and at-risk students. In a qualitative study aimed at examining how teachers’ internal psychological characteristics transact with external environments to produce emotions in schools serving high-minority populations, it was found that these teachers had experienced unpleasant emotions such as disappointment and frustration in their daily work (Cross & Hong 2012). However, the excellent teachers shifted their thinking to consider coping strategies through which they could achieve more favourable outcomes in class rather than remaining immersed in the unpleasant emotions.

More attention has been given to teacher support (such as listening, caring for and encouragement) in classes of at-risk students. Brewster & Bowen (2004) found that levels of school meaningfulness among Latino middle and high school students increased as levels of perceived teacher support increased, and Hamre & Pianta (2005) showed that academic achievement in the first grade by high functional risk children was greatest among those in classrooms offering high emotional support. In these classrooms, teachers were aware of and responsive to individual students’ needs, offered effective and proactive behaviour management, and created a positive classroom climate in which teachers and students enjoyed each working with each other and their time in the classroom.

It is evident, though, that meaningful connections between teachers and students – when teachers believe in their students’ ability to graduate, and provide support and caring – contributed, among other things, to high-school students who were at risk of dropping out staying on at their school instead (Knesting & Waldron 2006). In fact, the amount that at-risk students learn may depend on whether they perceive that their teachers care; such students put in more effort when teachers care about them (Muller 2001).

**Method**

Due to its interpretive nature, this study employed a qualitative research methodology to collect and analyse the empirical data.

**The Context**

Israel has a total population of about eight million (around 80 per cent Jewish and 20 per cent Arab) and is divided into social, national and political enclaves (Eliam & Ben-Peretz 2006), which are reflected in its educational system. Thus, education in Israel is characterised by separate school systems for religious and secular Jewish children, and separate state and church religious schools for Arab children. This article focuses on the state education system that serves almost 60 per cent of the Jewish children. This system is founded on a system of universal values, characterising a humanistic educational view of the world with an emphasis on the common denominator of humans, people and culture (Dambo, Levin, & Siegler 1997). The purpose of education is to inculcate general and diverse cultural values while granting legitimacy to pluralism, creativity and critical points of view. The classes are mixed (girls and boys study together) and the subject matter includes general subjects (maths, history, physics, and so forth).

Consistent with the structure of the other educational systems in Israel, the system runs from first grade at age six to twelfth grade at age 18, matriculation exams are performed at the end of high school, teachers follow a national core curriculum, and the student configuration of 1-6 (elementary school), 7-9 (middle school), 10-12 (high school) is prevalent.
The Programme

Founded ten years ago by Pitchon Lev, a not-for-profit organisation (working in welfare and education), the Touching the Horizon (Sheva) programme, which is oriented towards underprivileged high school students, aims to empower each student, to improve their achievement, and to help develop social skills and competencies that are necessary in modern society. The programme begins in the tenth grade and ends four years after graduation (only in mainstream schools). It includes a weekly workshop aimed at empowering and preparing the students for a responsible and healthy life through the development of self-awareness and the encouragement of a positive self-image. It also includes topics such as inter-personal communication, emotional management and regulation, time management, leadership, careers and decision-making. The teachers use multiple teaching methods, including role playing, group works and so on.

Each programme has its own teacher-guide and a key element in the success of the programme is this guide, whose major task is to create close and personal contact with the students through monthly telephone calls, email correspondence, periodic encounters with the graduates, and Facebook connections with the students. Every student is allowed to make contact with the guide each time he needs advice or to pour his heart out. The guide is also responsible for the evaluation of each student’s progress and condition (e.g. emotional, family related, professional), and for the empowerment of the students in the workshops. The emotional relationships between the teacher-guide and the students are the focus of this article.

Participants

A total of 15 semi-structured interviews with the programme graduates were conducted during 2014. Eight of the graduates are women and seven are males, and their ages ranged from 19 to 22. They live in the north and centre of Israel, and nine are serving in the Israeli army (conscription), four are in college, and two work in temporary jobs. The graduates were chosen randomly from a list supplied by the programme managers and were told their participation in the study was voluntary, i.e. they could refuse to be interviewed. Only two graduates refused to participate (due to lack of time). Graduates are commonly used in educational research as a source of information about school life, students’ social and emotional experiences, teacher-student relationships, the outcomes of particular educational streams, and so on (Mitchell & Douglas 2007; Wallenhorst 2013).

Procedure

One or two semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the graduates. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewer obtained permission to record the interview and promised complete confidentiality. In the first part of the interview, participants were asked general questions about the programme in which they had participated during high school and about their school life and achievements. Questions about the ways the programme had influenced their learning, life, self-concept and achievements were asked next. Specifically, the graduates were asked about the professional and emotional support they received, the role of the teachers and the guide in the programme, the sources of their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the programme, the influence of the guide upon their self-growth, the changes they experienced during high school, and so on. It is important to note that the interviewer avoided using any words that might be interpreted as favourite emotions (e.g. the importance of caring, being attentive) in order to refrain from indicating what Paton (2002) called ‘social desirability’, instead leaving the interviewee to provide his/her own interpretations.
The manual analysis of the interview data followed the four stages described by Marshall & Rossman (2011): ‘organising the data’, ‘generating categories, themes and patterns’, ‘testing any emergent hypothesis’ and ‘searching for alternative explanations’. This analysis aims at identifying central themes in the data – searching for recurrent experiences, feelings and attitudes so as to be able to code, reduce and connect different categories into central themes. The coding was guided by the principles of ‘comparative analysis’ (Strauss & Corbin 1998), which includes the comparison of any coded element in terms of emergent categories and sub-categories. In order to increase the trustworthiness and reliability of the research, the analysis was strengthened by structured analysis and peer review, two common indicators qualitative researchers use to build confidence in their analytical procedures (Marshall & Rossman 2011).

Findings
From the interview transcripts we learn about the significant role of the teacher-guide in the programme in general, and in the lives of the graduates in particular, chiefly because of the teacher-guide’s ability to create emotional relationships with the graduates, as reflected in the following two quotes:

For me [the guide] was the program per se...we used to sit in a circle, he used to talk with us, explaining many things, providing us with many tools to cope with things in life... (a male graduate)

[The guide] for me is the most important teacher in the programme, no doubt...[he] is like a friend who accompanies me in my life... (a female graduate)

The guide-student relationships are embedded with many positive emotions that, in turn, promote a climate of trust in the class and lead to mutual emotional commitments. It is unsurprising, then, that the interviewees used positive emotional words and expressions to describe their relationships with the guide, such as ‘wonderful relationships’, ‘we love him’ and ‘I felt so much close to the guide’.

The good relationships are explained by the positive attitudes of the guide towards the students, his respect towards every student and, above all, his capability to listen to students’ difficulties and needs and to encourage them to bare their souls. One of the female graduates indicated that, ‘we have always waited for the meetings with [the guide], we loved him very much, he is warm, so supporting, it is so fun to talk with him, you feel so close [to him]...’. A male graduate added:

[The guide] was so close to us, we came to him for advice in many areas...he used to help us, told us to come and talk with him about everything, this was great!

The high interpersonal communication skills of the guide were considered by the graduates to contribute to the positive emotional relationships between him and the students, or as one of the male graduates said, ‘he knew how to talk with us’. Another male graduate praised the guide, indicating that, ‘I’m sure you chose [the guide] because of his social skills...’.

In the view of many of the graduates, the guide was attentive to the students’ needs and expressed an interest in their lives – a major element in any emotional relationship between people. Thus, the guide is depicted as ‘the person who was the warmest towards us, always ready to listen to you’, as echoed in the following quotes:

[The guide] is like a miracle...he supports, helps, sits and cries with you, will help you... every two weeks, if I remember well, there were personal meetings with him...Is everything okay with you? No, why? How is at home? I felt so close to him, really (a female graduate).
[The guide] is an amazing person. He listens, gives advice, calls, wants to know if I need anything...he even helped me write my cv. He was always there to help... (a female graduate).

The guide as perceived as someone who genuinely cared for the students, listened to their daily problems and difficulties, and provided any assistance they needed, even after they had graduated from school and joined college or the labour market. Furthermore, the guide's interest in the students' lives was not limited to attentiveness, but rather seemed to be proactive. He persuaded students to share their personal difficulties and problems with him, carried out home visits, called their home and responded to their changing conditions. One of the female graduates recalled how the guide helped her family when they suffered severe financial problems:

...He visited my home. I and my mother moved an apartment and our financial condition was hard. He visited our home, I remember he brought packages of food every week, I remember. It was such a hard time...and he helped us so much, he brought meat, rice, pasta, so many things we needed...

The graduates emphasised the sincere interest of the guide in their birthdays, life events (e.g. admission to college/the army) and so on. The guide provided emotional and mental support, consultation and assistance, and therefore was presented by the graduates as someone who influenced them to a large extent beyond their life in school. For example, one of the male graduates, a soldier serving mandatory military service in the army, indicated that he had consulted recently with the guide about his career options, stating that, ‘[the guide] gives me an advice, explains the principles of work life, weaknesses, and I get the tools needed to know how to get along, where to go’. Thus, the guide is seen as someone who has assisted the students with their personal and academic problems:

I used to come to [the guide] with my personal problems and he simply helped me solve them...he told me how to behave, how to respond. He really helped me (a male graduate).

We opened the workshop with the guide by presenting our problems in school. He used to help us, suggesting us how to talk with our teachers, something like that...if you have any personal problems, at home, with your girlfriend, something like that, he always gave us many suggestions (a male graduate, college student).

Clearly, the students shared their intimate experiences, anxieties and concerns with the guide because they believed that he had high instructional and emotional capabilities, as reflected in the following quote:

[The guide] had a touch! No matter how I felt, he has always been there for me...he knew to say the right words, was always heart-warming. I was in an uneasy situation feeling depressed sometimes, and he always knew how to raise my mood... (a female graduate).

The guide seemed to create emotional relationships with the students that enabled him to provide them with many ideas and insights. Likewise, the guide encouraged the students to invest considerable efforts and time in their studies and empowered their self-concept and self-efficacy by emphasising that anyone can succeed, even if he/she belongs to an underprivileged community or suffers a fear of failure. The methods the guide used to encourage the students are elaborated on below:

First of all, I strongly believe in myself, and when I’m not feel fully confident, I call [the guide], and he eliminates all my anxieties in one second, I don’t know how...I felt it when I
entered the college and he told me it is a piece of cake for you, don’t be scared, you will get used to it… (a female graduate, college student).

[The guide] is a great person, he is like one of my family members, like a father. He has always been there to motivate us, he showed us he believes we will make it, and refused to hear ‘I can’t do it’. He made me think I can do it, he made me believe in myself (a female graduate).

The guide spurred the students to take their final exams regardless of the end results, emphasising that failure is legitimate but giving up is undesirable. In doing so, he seemed to inculcate the belief that, ‘if you don’t try you will never know if you are good’, and consequently convinced the students to make every effort needed to pass the tests successfully.

However, emotional support is insufficient; the guide also provided the students with practical knowledge needed in adult life and discussed with them the issues of career aspirations (‘What would I like to do in my life?’), leadership development and effective learning strategies. One female graduate recalled that the guide used to state that, ‘if you look at something from a negative point of view, it will lead to something negative, but if you look at it positively, it will be positive.’

The personal and collective encounters with the guide helped the students to overcome personal fears and weaknesses, taught them to cope with stress, and provided them with mental tools to understand other people’s drives and attitudes in a better way. Generally speaking, the guide is considered to have contributed to their academic success, career aspirations and improved self-concept. I elaborate on these subjectively held benefits in the following sections.

‘The guide helped me succeed in the final exams’

Most of the interviewees highlighted the overall contribution of the programme to their success in their final exams and the considerable improvement in their academic achievements. They indicated that, ‘if I didn’t participate in the programme I wouldn’t pass the final exams’, or ‘it helped me pass the school years because I didn’t like to study and it was something else’. One of the female graduates noted that, ‘it was the first time I took my life in my hands, I came to the class regularly, I didn’t sit in the school yard but more focused on my studies’, and added that, ‘thanks to the programme, I managed to pass some of the final exams. Otherwise, I wouldn’t make it…’

More specifically, the graduates mentioned the salient role of the guide in their academic success:

…I started in a class I didn’t want to be there. No one ever learned there, no teachers, and suddenly we got the programme, and particularly [the guide]. It was like a light for those who did wanted to study; it opened us an opportunity to pass some final exams, the workshops with the guide… (a female graduate).

A male graduate, a solder in the Israeli army, highlighted the influence of the programme in general, and of the guide in particular, on his success in the final exams:

I used to be a very bad boy. I used to hit other boys, things like that. But, when [the guide] talked with us about the life of the adults and things like that, I realised I couldn’t be so irresponsible and should think about my life… I passed all the final exams and can go to university if I want…

Many expressed their gratitude towards the programme staff, explaining that without them they would not have passed the final tests and could not have considered higher education as an option in their lives. The guide is presented as someone who helped them to organise their thoughts and
focus their attention on academic achievements, although some indicated they had always wanted to pass the final exams; they simply had not grasped the proper ways to do it.

‘The guide helped me develop academic aspirations’

Most of the graduates who participated in this study also reported their aspirations to study at university or college following their participation in the programme. They tended to cite the guide, who told them how important it was to study at a higher education institution and not to block their career opportunities at an early age. One male graduate noted that, ‘if I was in a regular class, I mean with disruptive students, I wouldn’t see myself aspiring into higher education but ending the high school and stuck in a certain workplace’.

Indeed, the graduates indicated they would like to study a wide variety of professions, including architecture, criminology and psychology and the arts, and made a connection between the guide’s inspiration moulding their academic aspirations and their current desire to study at college/university:

I want to study criminology, this is something I’m interested in, police, investigations…[the guide] studied criminology, so I said to myself I want it also (a female graduate)

This female graduate further indicated that without the guide, she would not have considered higher education at all. A male graduate who is studying at university made a similar point, commenting that, ‘most of the chances I would be in a workplace now if I didn’t participate in the programme’. Having said this, he further recalled that the guide encouraged him to consider engineering due to his impressive results in maths:

In the workshop I realised that if you don’t study, you will never succeed in live, and even those who made money without studying in school, learned a lot before they earned so much money…

Needless to say, the workshop was headed by the guide, whose positive emotional relationships with the students enabled him to persuade them to consider continuing on to higher education. This is not to say that all the graduates developed academic aspirations due to their encounters with the guide. The career aspirations of most of them, however, were shaped at least in part by the positive relationships with the guide, who seemed to be a kind of role model for many of them.

‘The guide helped me strengthen my self-concept’

Notably, the guide’s major influence upon the programme’s graduates related to self-growth and development. He provided the students with practical knowledge, improved their self-concept, and strengthened their self-efficacy and social skills. The graduates feel they acquired academic and practical knowledge during their participation in the programme – such as on the hazards of alcoholism, drug use, or violence – and learned the basic skills needed to avoid any sort of addiction. Thus, many graduates made a connection between their conversations with the guide and their increased self-confidence and personal empowerment:

I didn’t understand texts in Hebrew very well, and because we talked in the group, so I changed my mind about it…we talked about self-confidence with the guide, talked about everything. To say the truth, I was a little bit shy because I didn’t get along with some students, but the guide forced me to talk. So, my self-confidence increased slowly, and I started talking with others… (a female graduate).
The group activities with the guide led them to open their hearts and in turn, they claimed, enhanced their self-confidence, as indicated by one female graduate, who stated that what contributed to her success was ‘the group in which I felt safe enough to talk, to get advice and support, either from the whole group or from [the guide] personally. It really gave me confidence.’

In addition, the workshop headed by the guide was connected subjectively by the interviewees to their improved self-concept and assertiveness, as echoed in the following quotes:

Today I don’t think about potential failures. I simply go and do what I want. When I entered the college I started studying every day from 8am to 4pm and I felt I can’t make it…how am I going to do it? So, I decided not to go back, I have to take the first step…what helped me is what [the guide] said; never think about a failure, never say I can’t make it, it’s not for me… (a female graduate, college student).

You know, I believe in myself today more than ever, and when I don’t I call [the guide]. He knows how to take my fears out of my mind in a second, I don’t know how, one sentence and he makes me feel better (a female student).

Most of the interviewees reported on their increased self-efficacy (i.e. their belief in their ability to succeed in life) due to their interactions with the guide, who urged them to express themselves openly and to learn new things. One female graduate commented:

In our class with the guide, twice a week, he has always empowered us…he told us to look at what we have and never at what we lack…he talked about the meaning of adult life…

Other graduates clarified the messages they received from the guide that resulted in their increased self-efficacy:

…Out of the blue I realized I can make it…that I can pass the final exams…I could feel that because of the support I got in the Program. [The guide] said it’s a piece of cake for us, that we could make it, that we have the opportunity to pass the text…then I said, I will try, and I started thinking about the future… (a male graduate, solider).

Influenced by the idea that ‘everyone can do it’ put forward by the guide through lectures, workshops, simulations, personal talks, role playing and so on, the graduates felt much more confident and ready to face future difficulties than ever before. They quoted the guide as saying ‘never give up’ and ‘feel empowered’. One exceptionally reflective male graduate explained the sources of this influence in his case:

At the end, when you are in a warm place, when others try to help you, you can’t ignore them, because at the end, [the guide] has high expectations from you. He gives you his hand and if you don’t take it, he won’t feel well, he won’t feel he did the right thing with you. I think the programme gave me this warm hand, so you have to meet their expectation, you have to raise the bar…

Another graduate was more specific about the guide’s contribution to his self-concept, indicating that, ‘[the guide] let me feel that if I really want to succeed, I can reach at places I have never thought I would be there’.

**Insights into Educational Leadership in Underprivileged Communities**

From the analysis of the interviews with the programme graduates, a number of insights can be offered for educational leaders who serve underprivileged communities and strive to improve each student’s achievements and self-concept. First, and most significantly for the subsequent insights, educational leaders ought to be aware of the key role of emotions in constructing positive
relationships between schools and their at-risk students, let alone between teachers and students who live in disadvantaged families. Consistent with previous studies (e.g. Cross & Hong 2012; Mazer et al. 2014), the positive emotional relationships that were created between the guide and the students in the programme are only one example of the positive impact of teachers’ emotions on achievements and self-concept among underprivileged students. Every educational leader, then, is expected not only to make staff familiar with the issue of teachers’ emotions, but also to adopt a similar stance in his/her contacts with both teachers and students.

Second, the graduates provided us with a broader perspective through which to look at the concept of care in teaching. In their view, the guide cared for them in a wide variety of ways, from the provision of practical knowledge they will need as adults, through proactive interest in their well-being and welfare, to unflagging support during hard times and critical life events. His/her support is further constructed in terms of listening, encouragement and respect, and is not only related to academic achievement but also to the students’ increased self-confidence and self-efficacy and better social competencies. Thus, while previous research has shown that support from teachers becomes more important for the academic success of racial and ethnic minority students (Stanton-Salazar 1997; Ginorio & Huston 2001), the current study emphasises other outcomes of this support and encourages educational leaders to not only support students consistently, but also to provide their own staff with much emotional support, in the hope that they will concomitantly transmit emotional support to their students.

Finally, the graduates’ accounts reflect, above all, the students’ desire for the emergence of emotional leadership, i.e. for educational leaders whose emotional intelligence is high and who can therefore follow Covey’s (1989) seven habits of effective people, in particular commitment to others and empathic listening. They wanted their feelings to be recognised and managed by their teachers effectively, and made a connection between emotional intelligence (without indicating this concept) and their self-growth and success. Thus, the centrality of educational leadership that promotes emotions in schools is unquestionable, given the simple fact that the guide was recruited based on the programme managers’ policy of promoting the emotional aspects of the schooling process.

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Master Teachers as Teacher Leaders: Evidence from Malaysia and the Philippines

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Abstract: The career paths of teachers in most countries lead to talented practitioners progressively reducing their classroom work to take on leadership and management responsibilities culminating in headship. Some education systems seek to keep good teachers in classrooms by offering alternative promoted posts, often described as master teachers. This article presents evidence of the role of master teacher in two under-published Asia-Pacific contexts: Malaysia and the Philippines. Drawing on interviews with master teachers, and their principals and colleagues, the article provides a picture of the activities and role relationships of these senior practitioners. The findings show that the master teacher role largely succeeds in keeping talented and ambitious teachers in the classroom, but there is only limited evidence of a wider impact on colleagues, schools and the education system.

Introduction

The descriptors used to define the field have changed from management to leadership during the past 25 years (Gunter 2004). While these changes may be partly semantic (Bush 2008), they also signal a shift in the practices of school principals and senior staff. Management is associated with positional leadership, where heads derive their authority from their formal role as the most senior professionals in schools. The hierarchy is the most important aspect of power and principals can decide whether and how to delegate responsibilities to other staff in a ‘top-down’ model. Similarly, patterns of accountability are vertical, with teachers and other employees being answerable to the next level in what is a bureaucratic model (Bush 2011).

This managerial approach has been criticised, and perhaps discredited, as slow and inflexible. Creativity and innovation are discouraged and participants are unable to contribute to decision-making. Teachers may be left to implement decisions made further up the hierarchy, within or outside the school, and their professional knowledge and discretion may be deployed only to decide how to implement, not whether to do so. The emphasis is often on adherence to procedure, which might be described as managerialism, rather than making professional judgements about what is best for students.

Leadership offers a different perspective, with its focus on influence rather than positional authority. This is a more fluid concept and leadership may emanate from any part of the organisation. The
hierarchy is less important than expertise in determining the locus of decision-making. Leadership may also reside in groups, as well as individuals, regardless of their formal status. Relationship patterns may be lateral as well as vertical and arise from informal activity as well as formal structures. Leadership may also be conceptualised as a shared activity (Crawford 2012) while management often relates to individual, and usually senior, roles. This has led to the popularity of distributed leadership (Gronn 2010; Harris 2010) and teacher leadership (Muijs & Harris 2007). However, evidence on how teacher leadership may be exercised is limited.

School career paths generally involve a gradual reduction in teaching and a parallel growth in leadership and management responsibilities (Bush 2010). In order to gain promotion, and to receive enhanced rewards, talented teachers reduce their classroom teaching loads and substitute school-wide responsibilities. While it is sensible to appoint principals, and senior and middle leaders, from the best teachers, the consequence is a loss of talented teachers from the classroom. This concern led to the development of alternative career paths, to enable good teachers to remain in the classroom and also to broaden their influence to include other classrooms, and perhaps also other schools, but with a clear focus on teaching and learning. The labels applied to such roles vary but they include ‘master teachers’ (Thompson, Ransdell & Rousseau 2004) and, in the English context, advanced skills teachers (Fuller, Goodwyn & Francis-Brophy 2013).

Malaysia and the Philippines are two countries that have introduced master teachers, but there is only limited evidence of how they operate and their effectiveness. This article reports parallel research, undertaken in both countries, which seeks to establish the activities of master teachers of science in secondary schools, and whether they have succeeded in maintaining a sharp focus on teaching and learning. The project sought to ascertain whether they can be regarded as teacher leaders and, if so, how they exert their influence. In particular, the research team examined several aspects of their work:

- their own classroom practice
- their work as a subject leader
- their whole-school role
- their role beyond their own school.

The research involved eight exploratory case studies in Malaysia, and seven in the Philippines. In both countries, interviews were conducted with master teachers, school principals and staff who interacted with the master teachers.

The Malaysian Education Context

The Malaysian education system is overseen by the Ministry of Education. It is the responsibility of the federal government to provide education, but each state has an education department to coordinate educational matters in its area. Teachers are appointed and promoted to various positions by the national Ministry within a very hierarchical system. The Ministry is also responsible for pre-service and in-service training of teachers and is the employer for all teachers.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint, published in 2013, foreshadows certain reforms and stresses that teaching is the foundation of any education system. It also repeats Barber & Moursheed’s (2007) view that ‘the quality of the school system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers’ (Ministry of Education 2103: 5-2). The Blueprint also mentions the master teachers’ programme, intended to provide pathways to improved career progression. Since its inception in 1994, 13,300 teachers have been designated as master teachers. These master teachers provide guidance to younger and less
experienced teachers and are perceived to be the ‘crème de la crème’ of the Malaysian teaching profession (Noraini, Azliza & Radha 2013).

The Philippine Education Context

The Philippine education system is underpinned by the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013. It increased the number of years of basic education from 10 years to 13 years, through the K-12 initiative. This comprises one year of kindergarten, six years of elementary education, four years of junior high school and two years of senior high school. It aims to produce graduates who are globally competitive, functionally literate and equipped with 21st century skills.

The master teacher concept was introduced in the Philippines in 1978. This provided a two-track system of career progression for teachers: school administration and classroom teachers. The classroom teacher’s route was enacted through the creation of master teacher positions, at four levels that match the salary grades of principals and assistant principals.

The formal expectations of master teachers are that:

- they should have regular teaching loads.
- they are expected to assist other teachers in the school or district in improving their competence
- they should take the lead in the preparation of instructional materials or perform such other functions assigned by the principal
- they may also be required to serve as demonstration teachers or teacher consultants in the school or the district.

The introduction of master teachers was intended to retain effective teachers in the classroom, but the poor performance of secondary schools has continued. There is no standard format to assess the performance of master teachers. There is also no process for addressing underperformance by master teachers. Finally, there is also little research on master teachers to guide policy decisions.

Literature Review: Teacher Leadership

There have been continuing efforts to consider the role of teacher leadership in the classroom context as a process of mutual influence and the sharing of professional practice. Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson & Hann (2002) say that teacher leadership is the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals and other members of the school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and outcomes. Frost (2008: 337) characterises teacher leadership as involving shared leadership, teachers’ leadership of development work, teachers’ knowledge building, and teachers’ voices. Coggins & McGovern (2014: 16) outline five key purposes of teacher leadership:

1. improving student outcomes
2. improving the access of high-need students to effective teachers
3. extending the careers of teachers looking for growth opportunities
4. expanding the influence of effective teachers on their peers
5. ensuring a role for teachers as leaders in policy developments affecting their practice.

Harrison & Killion (2007) refer to ten roles for teacher leaders, of which the first six are the most significant: resource provider, instructional specialist, curriculum specialist, classroom supporter, learning facilitator and mentor. Danielson (2006) makes an important distinction between formal
and informal teacher leadership roles. The former hold positions such as department chairs or master teachers (our emphasis). Informal teacher leaders emerge spontaneously and organically from the ranks of teachers. They have no positional authority and their influence arises from the respect of their peers. Muijs & Harris’s (2007: 961) research in three UK schools showed that:

Teacher leadership was characterised by a variety of formal and informal groupings, often facilitated by involvement in external programmes. Teacher leadership was seen to empower teachers, and contributed to school improvement through this empowerment and the spreading of good practice and initiatives generated by teachers.

Timperley (2005: 418) cautions that developing teacher leadership in ways that promote student achievement presents difficulties. Teacher leaders with high acceptability among their colleagues are not necessarily those with appropriate expertise. Conversely, the micro-politics within a school can reduce the acceptability of those who have the expertise. Stevenson (2012) argues that the interpretation of teacher leadership is managerialist in nature and inherently conservative. Muijs & Harris (2007: 126) conclude that ‘teacher leadership requires active steps to be taken to constitute leadership teams and provide teachers with leadership roles. A culture of trust and collaboration is essential, as is a shared vision of where the school needs to go, clear line management structures and strong leadership development programmes.’

Lambert (2003) comments that teacher leadership has been ‘shackled’ by archaic definitions of leadership and time-worn assumptions about who can lead. Similarly, Johnson & Donaldson (2007) found that teacher leaders often struggled because schools did not provide a professional framework or establish clear responsibilities to legitimise their work. Grant (2006: 519), following research in South Africa, argues that teacher leadership occurs at four levels: in the classroom, working with other teachers, as an influence on the school, and as a member of the wider community.

Helterbran (2008: 363) notes that teacher leadership ‘remains largely an academic topic and, even though inroads have been made, teacher leadership remains more a concept than an actuality’. The term is widely used but much of the focus has been on salary scales and career structures rather than the practice and philosophy of leadership, as also noted in the earlier discussion of master teachers in Malaysia and the Philippines. The research reported in this article contributes to the limited evidence on teacher leadership through its focus on master teachers. As noted above, while teacher leadership can be independent of formal roles, it may require the legitimacy conferred by titles such as ‘master teacher’ to make a reality of teacher leadership. However, Spillane & Healey (2010) caution that having a formally designated leadership role, while also working as a classroom teacher, is likely to constrain the time and effort leaders are able to devote to supporting their colleagues.

**Literature Review: Master Teachers**

The limited literature on master teachers focuses on subject pedagogy and the capacity of the master teacher to develop other teachers, on the approaches used to enliven effective teaching, and on the relationship between the use of the terms ‘master’ or ‘expert’ and status and salary rewards.

**International Research**

The concept of master teachers has grown from a wish to harness the skills of successful classroom teachers and to use these for both student and colleague development. Fuller et al. (2013: 463) trace the background to the status-based Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) grade in England, designed to reward successful teachers. Following research with 849 ASTs, they note that:
[G]rades that recognise and reward teaching excellence do contribute in important ways to a teachers’ professional identity via an increased sense of recognition, reward and job satisfaction . . . [and] it allows highly accomplished teachers to remain where they want to be and that is the classroom.

Utley, Basile & Rhodes (2003: 526), in work on the role of master teachers in co-coordinating personal and professional development at 31 primary school sites associated with Columbia University in the USA, note that research and enquiry was a successful means of fostering leadership, but they also stress the importance of effective liaison between the schools and higher education facilitators.

Buskist (2004: 4), following in depth interviews with 20 students, suggests that master teachers focus on thinking processes and problem solving, with current subject content taught in an enthusiastic way. They show a ‘seemingly boundless’ interest in students and colleagues as co-workers.

Montecinos, Pino, Campos-Martinez, Dominguez & Carreno (2014: 290), reporting on interviews with five master teachers in Chile, point to tensions arising from contrasting views of professionalism. The members of the ‘Teachers of Teachers Network’ had to conceal their status as master teachers in order to work with others who were not ready to accept the perceived ‘imposed improvement’ arising from conventional professional development practices. This links to Stevenson’s (2012) view that teacher leadership may be seen as managerialism.

**Concepts**

There is some ambiguity about the use and meaning of overlapping terms in the limited literature currently available. ‘Expert teachers’ refer to those with pedagogic skills (Van Driel & Berry 2012: 28) whilst the term ‘master teacher’, despite its gendered terminology, builds on the skills of the expert teacher to contribute to the professional growth of others. This is shown in the development of Standards for Master Teachers in England (Department for Education 2011: 9-11), with their emphasis on knowledge, enhanced classroom performance, attention to outcomes, environmental awareness reflecting the ethos of the school, and professional confidence and awareness.

Thompson et al. (2004: 3) note that master teachers show pace, subject understanding, individual student awareness and effective communication, but were slow to develop constructivist approaches, and the observed lessons were all teacher led. This was also noted by Lim, Pagram & Nastiti (2009), in detailed work in four Indonesian schools. They contend that there should be a move from exam-driven to holistic education, from didactic to experiential development activities, and from hierarchic to collegial structures. They conclude that master teachers should be developed as ‘job-embedded, site based, needs-based, collaborative’ and sustainable (pp. 6-7).

Carolan & Guinn (2007: 45-46) stress that master teachers should have pedagogic approaches which involve offering personalised scaffolding, using flexible means to reach defined ends, mining subject-area expertise, and creating a caring classroom in which differences are seen as assets. These skills apply to both students and the development of colleagues, and Carolan & Guinn (2007) stress the need for teacher development, notably through mentoring and coaching. In work for the English National College for School Leadership (NCSL), now the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL), Patterson & Creasy (2005) suggest that leaders should create systems for the development of expert or master teachers at all levels, and equip all leaders in mentoring and coaching skills. Bundy, Walsh & Mongillo (2015: 67) report on interviews with six acknowledged teacher leaders in South Africa. They argue that aspects of emotional intelligence to promote self-perception and reflection are recognised requirements for successful leadership with peers.
Malaysian Research

There is very little research focusing directly on master teachers, although Bajunid (2004: 212) stresses the importance of training for school leaders. While the use of the term ‘master teacher’ is implied rather than overt, proposals for the introduction of new standards recognise ‘the development of tool kits and application of standards criteria, such as the ISO or other international standards criteria, to improve the performance of students, teachers, administrators and organisations and community accountability’.

Ibrahim, Haniem, Aziz & Nambiar (2013: 86) investigated the practices of three master teachers in secondary schools in Malaysia and noted the gains to students and staff in the use of international best practice. Mokshein, Ahmad & Vongalis-Macrow (2009: 28) give an overall view of teacher development and note that promotion is tied to salary progression rather than to evidence of teacher quality:

> Under this fast track, an excellent subject teacher can be promoted to the highest grade category after only five years of service. This is special compensation beyond the normal track promotional practices of the profession, so that teachers’ pay scales and career paths are more comparable to other professions.

Boey (2010: 28) considers teacher empowerment and contends that a complex of social, psychological and structural inhibitors also limits professional development and pedagogic independence. Although not overt, the implication is that this inhibits master teacher policies and potential.

Philippine Research

As noted earlier, there is no evidence of empirical research in the Philippines, where master teacher concepts and practices are related to salary and promotion scales as shown in the conditions for employment (Philippine Department of Education 2012). Yamauchi & Parendekar (2014) show that adherence to these scales may inhibit student outcomes and teacher development.

Methodology and Methods

As noted above, research on master teachers in Malaysia and the Philippines is very limited. This led the researchers to adopt an exploratory case study approach, with eight case studies in Malaysia and seven in the Philippines. The Philippines-based researcher is also a curriculum supervisor for science, and the research team decided to focus on science master teachers as this would facilitate access to participants and their schools. Sampling involved a mix of cluster, purposive and opportunist approaches. The sample comprised schools in specific regions in both countries convenient for the researchers. Only schools with science master teachers were eligible for inclusion in the research and the final samples were chosen by the researchers.

The original intention was to conduct eight school-based case studies in each country but, in the sampled division in the Philippines, there were only seven science master teachers in post, so there was a 100% sample of eligible teachers. In Malaysia, the researcher focused on Perak, where she had previously been a school principal and was confident about securing access. Eight science master teachers were included, using cluster and opportunity sampling (Fogelman & Comber 2007).

In each school, interviews were conducted with the science master teacher, the school principal and one teacher within the master teacher’s department. This sample was chosen to ensure respondent triangulation (Bush 2012) and to facilitate cross-case analysis within and between the two countries. In the Philippines, the seven master teachers were located at four high schools.
The sample comprised 18 participants: seven master teachers, seven other teachers from the same departments and four principals (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Philippines participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
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<th>C</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>V</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
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<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other teachers</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Malaysia, the eight master teachers were drawn from eight secondary schools in the state of Perak. The sample comprised 24 participants: eight master teachers, eight principals and eight teachers (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Malaysian participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other teachers</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interview guide was developed by the research team and used in both national contexts and in all 12 schools. The topics identified within a semi-structured approach were:

- How are master teachers selected?
- What is the role of master teachers in their own classrooms?
- What is the role of master teachers in other classrooms?
- What is the wider role of master teachers within the school?
- What is the role of master teachers beyond the school?
- What is the role of master teachers in curriculum development?
- How do master teachers impact on the work of other teachers?
- How, if at all, do master teachers impact on student outcomes?

**Master Teachers in Malaysia**

As noted above, the research team has data from eight Malaysian science master teachers, drawn from eight secondary schools in Perak. In each school, three people were interviewed: the science master teacher, the principal and another science teacher (see Table 2). This is a small sample but, given the limited previous research on master teachers in Malaysia, the findings still serve to fill a significant gap in our knowledge about this important role.
Selection of Master Teachers

Prospective master teachers need the support of their principals before submitting their applications to the district and, subsequently, to the state education office. The names of the short-listed candidates are forwarded to the Ministry of Education (MoE), where their appointments to master teacher positions are endorsed. The criteria, reported by all 24 participants, are that the candidates must have taught the subject for at least five years, have annual appraisal marks of not less than 80 per cent for the past three years, and be perceived to be passionate about teaching their subject. A majority (six) of the master teachers were interviewed, and their classroom teaching observed, by officers from the MoE, as part of the selection process.

The Role of Master Teachers in their Own Classrooms

All eight master teachers state that their main task in their own classroom is to help students pass their subjects in public exams, a view which is shared by the principals and other teachers. The master teachers all claim that they improve exam scores through innovative and creative teaching methods and good classroom management.

To improve pass rates for their subjects, master teachers devise various programmes to identify weak and strong students. These initiatives may overlap with programmes planned by the school senior assistant for academic affairs and lead to role ambiguity between the master teacher and the senior assistant. Such tensions were noted at School 1, where the master teacher is proactive and has acquired various skills through conferences, workshops and seminars. The principal has added to the tension by asking the master teacher to carry out some of the tasks that are usually part of the senior assistant’s work.

The teachers and principals agree that master teachers should be effective teachers in their own classroom, with strong subject knowledge, and equipped with innovative and creative ways of teaching to inspire students.

The Role of Master Teachers in Other Classrooms

All master teachers agree that their responsibility for improving their subject extends beyond their own classrooms to the whole school. However, their role in other classrooms is limited as they do not have formal authority vested in their positions and have to work through influence. Five of the master teachers feel intimidated by more experienced teachers and unable to exert their influence on them:

"Some of the teachers here are so experienced and they can teach better than me.... They give tuition classes outside and they are famous ... I don’t see how I can help these teachers in teaching chemistry." (MT3)

Although master teachers occupy senior positions, with high salaries, they do not have the authority to mandate teachers to follow certain practices, but have to focus on building good relationships to see their plans adopted by their fellow colleagues. Their work in other classrooms is achieved through indirect influence, not formal power:

"I try to involve the other teachers in my programmes, but it is difficult because I do not have the authority to enforce it. It is on a voluntary basis." (MT5)

All master teachers report that they do not work directly with students from other classes. This is supported by Principal 1, who comments that ‘they cannot interfere with the ways lessons are
being taught by other teachers’. Master teachers are in an ambiguous position in relation to their colleagues. Their role is not to direct but to be diplomatic and exert subtle influence:

It is about giving face, especially to the older and more senior teachers who have been here for a long time. (Teacher 1)

The limited influence of master teachers is linked to teachers’ expectations of the hierarchy in a centralised system:

It is difficult for master teachers to work within the hierarchical set up of the school structure. People prefer that the instruction and ideas are from the top and not from the master teachers. The teachers expect leadership to be exercised by the senior management team, and not from someone like the master teacher, who does not have the authority and power like the senior management team. (Principal 1)

The Wider Role of Master Teachers Within their Own School

Although both teachers and principals believe that master teachers should be allotted duties related to their subject specialism, they also feel that master teachers should be given a heavier work load due to their higher pay and status. In all eight schools, master teachers bear heavier responsibilities as they are given positions such as heads of special committees and organising teacher professional development programmes. The master teachers feel that they should be given tasks that are more closely related to academic enhancement. However, they have not complained because they feel honoured at being appointed to responsible positions, as also reported by teachers and principals:

The master teacher must be given more responsibilities, after all she is getting a higher salary and there is a chance for her to go up the level that is equivalent to a principal. (Teacher 2)

She is the master teacher and she needs to be given a higher position because we must give her the respect. (Teacher 7)

Five master teachers report that they have been given the role of planning and implementing the teacher professional development programmes for the whole school. They also have additional administrative responsibilities:

She now works more closely with the senior management team in providing ideas and helping to implement the programmes that come with the ideas. The senior management team consults her more now. (Teacher 4)

Principal 1 stresses the link between pay and master teachers’ workload: ‘She needs to show that she works for the extra pay and the higher salary scale she is getting’. However, one master teacher (MT3) feels that the higher salary and status do not justify the imposition of these extra responsibilities.

The Role of Master Teachers Beyond the School

All eight master teachers reported that they are involved in helping the district and state educational offices in planning and implementing activities, for both students and teachers, with the objective of helping schools to improve their pass rates. Activities such as competitions, quizzes and talks on technique in answering exam questions are organised every year. The state educational office asks master teachers to help write modules for teachers to use with weaker students. They also prepare lesson plans for the teachers.
The eight master teachers accept this extra work because they feel that being involved at district and state levels adds to their prestige:

I am also the key reference point for other teachers in the district. I am given the authority as the master teacher for physics in the district and called upon to do such activities when they organize their academic programmes for the year. (MT1)

When they (district and state educational offices) need help I have to help. After all, I am given this position by them. (MT5)

However, when master teachers spend time carrying out projects outside the school, they may incur the wrath of other teachers:

She was always out of school doing work for the district and state education offices and often not in school. We have to do a lot of ‘relief classes’ for her when she is not around. (Teacher 2)

We have to take care of her classes in school while she takes care of other school’s students and teachers. (Teacher 4)

Principals have to accept that master teachers may be called out of their school to carry out district and state activities. They have no alternative:

I always comply with that directive … I will allow him to go and just show me the letter and sign the book for going out of the school. That is all I require him to do. (Principal 3)

Master teachers’ obligations at the district and state level affect their school work and could have adverse effects on student learning and school performance:

Master teachers were often away from school and, when they come back, they had to have extra classes to catch up with lost time to finish the syllabus. (Principal 2)

Normally this kind of work will take her three to five days away from school and, when she comes back, she has to make up for lost time. (Principal 4)

The absence of master teachers causes other teachers to be unhappy about carrying their workloads. This has led some principals to discourage their teachers from applying for master teacher posts.

**The Role of Master Teachers in Curriculum Development**

Malaysia has a national curriculum, which is developed by the Centre for Curriculum Development within the Ministry of Education. The curriculum is called the National Integrated Curriculum for secondary schools. Master teachers, like other teachers and principals, are not allowed to make any amendments to the curriculum:

I have no right to change the curriculum and we are required to use the curriculum that has been prepared and given to us by the MOE. (MT2)

It is the job of the principal, the senior assistant for academic affairs and the heads of department to make sure all teachers teach according to the syllabus provided by the MOE, nothing more and nothing less. (MT3)

Nobody can change the curriculum, not even the master teacher, even though she is an expert in the subject. This is a very centralised education system. (Teacher 5)

The standardised curriculum does not meet the needs of all students, so master teachers may be asked by the state education office to produce modules, lesson plans and teaching materials for teachers to teach students at different levels. However, the modules and lesson plans are linked...
to the framework of the curriculum. Master teachers are asked to develop modules and teaching materials to address the limitations of the national curriculum.

**The Impact of Master Teachers on the Work of other Teachers**

The position of master teacher is a promoted post with a salary that matches that of senior management. However, to have an impact on the work of other teachers, the master teachers must have their respect. Their impact is greater among the younger, less experienced teachers (MT3). ‘They look upon her as an elder sister and they give her their respect by heeding her advice and directives’ (Principal 7). In contrast, underperforming master teachers are unlikely to gain respect:

> If the master teacher is not performing according to what is expected, [he will] not be respected or held in high regard by his colleagues. (Principal 3).

Creating an impact on the other teachers cannot be achieved through formal authority, but only through informal means such as being friendly, helpful and generous in sharing work and materials with them:

> I can only influence them by becoming a role model to them. I have to be friendly with the teachers if I want to have an impact on them. (MT6)

> Sometimes I get motivated watching her work. She inspires many of us by her inexhaustible energy and hard work. (Teacher 5)

> I see her impact on other teachers through her passion for the students and willingness to help them. (Principal 5)

**The Impact of Master Teachers on Student Outcomes**

Master teachers are perceived to be experts and should be able to make a positive impact on student outcomes, especially in their specialist subjects. However, the findings show that master teachers can make an impact on student outcomes only when students and teacher are in an environment that is conducive to learning.

The master teachers of three schools (5, 7 and 8) find it very difficult to make an impact on the students as there is a problem of high absenteeism among students and teachers. This is a school-wide problem and one that master teachers cannot handle at their level:

> This is a school level problem and the principal, together with the PTA, should work to solve this problem of attitude the community here has about education. (MT8)

> She has extra classes to help students but they don’t turn up. (Teacher 7)

> The teachers often are not here and she has to cancel many activities because teachers will last minute be on medical leave. (Teacher 7)

In five schools (1, 2, 3, 4 and 6), where there is a positive learning environment, the master teachers are able to carry out various programmes to improve their subject scores and enhance student outcomes. Teacher cooperation is also important for master teachers to have an impact on these outcomes. The impact is stronger if they develop other teachers:

> She also helps teachers to improve on quality of teaching. Good teachers mean good results. (Teacher 1)

> This is because we have a science master teacher and she develops other science teachers. (Teacher 4)
The master teacher can have a stronger impact on learning outcomes when they have the respect of their students:

He meant business and the students . . . respect him because they know if they follow what he tells them to do, they will get good results. (Teacher 6)

However, Principal 5 believes that the impact on students is wholly the master teacher’s responsibility:

I believe if she works hard and persists, the results will improve further. (Principal 5)

To have an impact on student outcomes, master teachers also need the support of senior staff, who hold formal power. The master teacher has no such power and this inhibits their impact:

Based on hierarchy, he is the lowest in rank and has no power over the teachers and students. He has to follow rules, policies and regulations formulated by the school management team. (Teacher 8)

A more positive position is noted at School 4, one of the best schools in the district:

The situation is good and I hope the students’ results stay good for years to come. The quality of teacher is important for that to happen. My master teacher helps in that sense. (Principal 4)

**Overview of the Malaysian Data**

The position of master teacher is a promoted post and it comes with a higher salary scale which could put a good master teacher at the same level as a principal. Although it is a ‘fast track’ to promotion, many teachers are not interested because of the additional workload. They have the same teaching load as other teachers but also have the responsibility of improving their own subjects within their own school, as well as at the district and state levels, and also take on school administrative roles unrelated to their specialism.

Master teachers do not have vested power and their activities depend on their influence and good relationships with teachers. The master teachers participating in this research faced two specific challenges. In good schools, with very well-established and senior teachers, master teachers might be perceived as lacking the experience or knowledge to influence them. It may be just as difficult to exert leadership among teachers who are not committed, and this may require the support of the principal and senior management team.

Malaysia has a national curriculum and even master teachers cannot make changes. However, the state education office may call upon master teachers to produce teaching materials for use with weaker students. The district education offices also enlist them to help with district-level activities. This may anger their colleagues who have to cover their classes. It also creates extra work for the master teachers, who have to provide the ‘missing’ lessons at a later time.

The evidence of master teachers’ impact on other teachers, and on student outcomes, is mixed but appears to depend on the level of support from the principal and the senior management team, as well as the master teachers’ interpersonal skills. However, master teachers in the case study schools seem to have achieved only modest success in improving classroom practice and learning outcomes. The duties they are allocated, unrelated to their specialist subject, appear to detract from their subject focus and from their potential to develop teachers and enhance student learning.
Master Teachers in the Philippines

As noted above, the research team has data from seven Philippine science master teachers. The sample was drawn from four schools, with two schools having one such teacher, one having two and one with three. This is a small sample but, given the lack of previous research on master teachers in this context, the findings still serve to fill a significant gap in our knowledge about this important role. As well as the seven master teachers, interviews were conducted with the four principals and with seven non-master teachers, one linked to each master teacher (see Table 1).

Selection of Master Teachers

Prospective master teachers submit an application and supporting documents, initially to the school selection committee, and then to the district and divisional selection committees. The district committee ranks applicants based on several criteria: curriculum development, organisation of in-service training, chairing special committees, community service, demonstration lessons, leadership potential and receipt of a meritorious award. The rankings are reviewed by the divisional selection committee, which makes the final decision. The process is widely understood and all 18 participants explained it in a similar way.

The Role of Master Teachers in their Own Classrooms

Despite their formal status, and being ‘technical experts in their area’ (CMT3), most (five) master teachers state that their classroom role is no different from other teachers. One (SMT2) adds that he must ensure that classroom and laboratory activities are congruent with student needs. Another (SMT1) appears to be disappointed that ‘master teachers are stuck in the classroom doing classroom instruction and ... managing laboratory activities’.

The principals confirm that they fulfil the same role as other teachers, but two add that they should also provide leadership for co-teachers:

- They should be knowledgeable of the subject content, strategies and techniques necessary for giving technical assistance to their co-teachers. (PB)
- Master teachers are the instructional facilitators in the classroom. They also serve as mentors for co-teachers. (PV)

Two of the principals confirm that their master teachers meet their expectations, but one declined to comment on this point and Principal S states that ‘some are doing what is expected of them’. The teachers reiterate the expectation that master teachers should be effective teachers in their own classrooms and show mastery of relevant concepts. ‘I expect them to be outstanding in classroom management’ (ST2). Five of these teachers also confirm that master teacher classroom roles are the same as for other teachers. However, four of these teachers add that some master teachers do not fulfil the expectations of their role, and one (ST2) notes that ‘activities of master teachers are not monitored’. Another teacher is scathing about their work:

- There are master teachers who come to work late, are lazy, and let students write on the board while the class copies. Most of them are old and non-computer literate. (CT3)

The implication of such comments is that master teachers may work harder to get the job than in performing the role well once appointed.
The Role of Master Teachers in Other Classrooms

Four of the master teachers say that there is no clear role for them in other science rooms and laboratories. CMT2 comments that she has no such role, ‘unless given instructions’, while VMT says ‘none, unless approached by another teacher’ and CMT1 notes that ‘assistance is given whenever approached. There is no definite schedule.’ Similarly, SMT2 reports that ‘I assist teachers especially when assigned as a trainer’. These responses all suggest a passive approach, but the other three master teachers all identify a range of activities, including technical assistance, coaching other teachers in terms of classroom delivery, conduct of laboratory activities and test construction (CMT3).

The principals generally paint a more positive picture of this aspect of master teachers’ work, pointing to technical assistance for teachers, coaching and mentoring, and monitoring curriculum implementation:

They assist non-master teachers in improving teaching-learning processes as well as in conducting laboratory lessons. They also monitor ... curriculum implementation ... [and] help in checking assessment tools [used by] science teachers. (PB)

Master teachers provide technical assistance to teachers in order to improve learning outcomes. (PV)

[Master teachers] give technical assistance to other teachers in terms of classroom instruction and construction of test items. (PS)

The other three largely confirm the principals’ perceptions:

They render technical assistance to non-master teachers on teaching strategies, innovations, development of assessment tools, and improvisation of instructional materials. (ST1)

They assist in the development of instructional materials and act as a demonstration teacher. (ST2)

Collectively, these data suggest a modest role for master teachers in other classrooms and in supporting other science teachers, contradicting the expectations in the literature. We will explore this issue in more detail later.

The Wider Role of Master Teachers in their Own Schools

Almost all the master teachers identify a wide range of additional responsibilities, which go well beyond their specialist curriculum and teacher development roles. They carry out general leadership and management activities, such as chairing school committees, but such roles are not confined to MTs and may be exercised by other teachers who do not hold such titles. Only one master teacher (CMT3) mentions a more specific role, that of helping colleagues in designing action research.

The principals largely confirm the accounts of the master teachers and all four state that master teachers are assigned committee chairing roles. Three (PB, PS and PV) mention that master teachers conduct research linked to school performance, while PC says that they ‘serve as demonstration
teachers’. Similarly, the teachers refer to the master teachers’ chairing roles and their wider responsibilities within the school. However, four of them stress that such roles may also be allocated to other teachers, suggesting that these functions are not specific to the master teacher role:

I am not a master teacher but I am assigned as a chairman and some master teachers are my members. (CT2)

Master teachers in our school have the same work as other teachers. A non-master teacher performs better than master teachers. A non-master teacher acts as officer-in-charge whenever the headteacher is out. (CT3)

These insights indicate that the wider work of master teachers in their schools is by no means confined to their specialist subject. In addition, it is clear that they may be no more likely than other teachers to exercise these wider leadership functions.

**The Role of Master Teachers Beyond the School**

The master teachers vary in the extent to which they are involved in activities outside their schools. Some of these relate to their specialist roles, notably preparing instructional materials, disseminating lesson plans and preparing action plans. These activities are not timetabled and appear to result from approaches from ‘higher authorities’ (CMT1) such as the education programme supervisor. Such activities may be ‘unofficial’ (VMT) and are not monitored (BMT). Master teachers may also be consulted by science teachers in other schools (SMT1 and SMT2). However, some activities are non-specific, including church and peace groups, and it is not clear how, if at all, these relate to their professional roles.

The principals largely confirm these activities. They note that master teachers have formal responsibilities in their district as trainers, demonstrators and facilitators in their specialist areas, but they do not work directly with teachers in other schools. They may also act as consultants for other schools or the district, but these are usually voluntary activities undertaken in their own time:

They serve as a link between school and community in implementing programmes and projects of the local government related to science [e.g. waste management]. (PB)

Most (four) of the teachers stated that master teachers had no role beyond their schools, but three were aware of their role in community activities. Two stated that they may assist teachers in other schools, but this seems to depend on invitations from district supervisors.

These findings suggest that there is no clear pattern of activity for master teachers outside their own schools. Much appears to depend on the initiative of local inspectors, who may or may not call upon master teachers to assist with local activities. The wider implication is that the role of master teacher is largely confined to their own schools.

**The Role of Master Teachers in Curriculum Development**

The Philippines operates a national curriculum and master teachers appear to have a limited role in curriculum development. Two master teachers (CMT1 and CMT2) say that they can modify curriculum activities, but only when ‘instructed’ by the supervisor. One claims to have some scope to modify the implementation of the curriculum, for example through changing activities to suit the needs of the students:

I design the syllabus for research in science and continuously improve it according to the results of my action research. I make minor modifications in the arrangement of lessons to suit the needs of the learners. (CMT3)
The principals are unanimous in confirming that the curriculum is fixed and disseminated to schools for delivery: ‘The role of the schools is to implement the curriculum’. However, two (PB and PC) add that master teachers can enrich the curriculum by modifying teaching strategies and by initiating projects and using action research to address learning difficulties. The teachers largely confirm that master teachers must adhere to the national curriculum, with limited scope for innovation except in respect of classroom activities.

**The Impact of Master Teachers on the Work of Other Teachers**

As noted above, the literature suggests that master teachers are expected to impact on the work of other teachers by passing on their expertise through mentoring, coaching or modelling. However, the Philippines data do not support such assumptions and the master teachers make very modest claims. One says that there is no impact, while two comment that their influence cannot be quantified. Significantly, two (BMT and VMT) add that no study has been undertaken to assess their impact. Four do offer specific examples of impact – influencing work ethics, boosting teacher morale and improving their teaching practice – but there appears to be no formal mechanism for assessing the effects of such initiatives.

Two principals (PB and PV) say that master teachers are role models for other teachers, while principal S comments that teachers ‘are motivated to work well’. The teachers appear to perceive little benefit from the master teachers. Three say that they do not impact at all on their work, while two simply comment that that master teachers ‘share their knowledge’. Two are more positive, with one (ST2) noting that they help to improve teaching competence and enhance leadership skills. Another explains the ways in which she has been helped:

> They helped me to improve my test construction skills as well as in modifying lab activities. They also suggested action research topics. (VT)

**The Impact of Master Teachers on Student Outcomes**

The master teachers make several claims about how they impact on student performance, for example in competitions. Three say that students of master teachers are expected to perform better than those of other teachers, but they acknowledge that there are no data to support this assumption and VMT acknowledges that improved student performance is ‘presumed because master teachers are considered to be experts’. There were some more specific examples, for example in respect of improved student performance in the National Achievement Test. One master teacher elaborates on her claims:

> Master teachers’ expertise added to teachers’ teaching competence, resulting in an improved performance level by students. Drop outs are minimised due to enhanced skills of teachers in simplifying lessons. (SMT1)

Two of the principals make specific claims about master teacher impact:

> Master teachers have greater influence on student outcomes. They seldom have students with failing grades in their class and drop out is minimised in their classes. (PB)

> ‘They improved performance in terms of science subjects. (PS)

Principal V is less specific, simply saying that master teachers are a ‘source of new ideas, innovation and a model for effective and efficient teaching’. Principal C is even more cautious, and normative, in noting that ‘it is expected that master teachers should have a higher achievement level as compared to other teachers’.
Three of the teachers say that there is little impact and one (BT) comments that ‘the impact is the same as other teachers’. The other teachers offer a more positive assessment:

- Enhanced teaching competence of master teachers results in a reduced dropout rate. (ST1)
- Master teachers have trained teachers to become better at creating change although there is no concrete data to support this. Improved teaching ability will result in better student outcomes. (ST2)
- Master teachers can simplify concepts and can explain it better, which is expected to result in higher student outcomes. (CT1)

The collective perceptions of the impact of master teachers are mixed and are not based on firm evidence. Significantly, even where claims of impact are made, they mostly relate to master teachers’ own classrooms and rarely to their influence on other teachers.

**Overview of the Philippines Data**

Although the data are limited, they provide some helpful insights into the work of master teachers in this under-researched context. The position of master teacher is sought after and a formal selection process is in place using clear national criteria, with the final decision being made at the divisional level. Master teachers are supposed to be exemplary teachers who demonstrate good practice within and beyond their own classrooms. In practice, however, their impact is limited by the plethora of additional administrative duties imposed on them and by variable levels of motivation to sustain the commitment shown when seeking the role after they have been appointed. Their roles beyond their own schools also appear to be limited, although the participating master teachers are involved in developing curricula and assessment strategies. It is also not clear whether they impact on student outcomes and, if they do, it relates to their own classes and not to their influence on other teachers. If the aim of the master teacher policy is to keep talented teachers in the classroom, some success has been achieved, but their wider impact appears to be modest.

**Conclusion: Enacting Teacher Leadership in Malaysia and the Philippines**

The data from Malaysia and the Philippines provide helpful new insights into the role of master teacher in these under-published contexts. In this section, we compare the findings from the two countries and link them to the existing literature.

**Master Teachers’ Classroom Practice**

Master teachers are assumed to be ‘expert’ professionals (Van Driel & Berry 2012) and their introduction in many national contexts reflects a wish to retain talented teachers in the classrooms as an alternative career pathway to the formal hierarchy that leads to reduced teaching time. As Fuller et al. (2013) note, it allows accomplished teachers to remain in the classroom. However, much depends on how such teachers are identified. In Malaysia, the selection criteria are that the candidates must have taught the subject for at least five years, have annual appraisal marks of not less than 80 per cent, and are perceived to be passionate about teaching the subjects. In the Philippines, applicants are judged on several factors: curriculum development, organisation of in-service training, chairing special committees, community service, demonstration lessons, leadership potential and receipt of a meritorious award. In both countries, these appear to be valid criteria but they do not guarantee that only ‘expert’ teachers are chosen and, in the Philippines, they seem to be largely independent of classroom performance.
Following their appointment, master teachers might be expected to demonstrate exemplary classroom practice, including subject understanding, individual student awareness and effective communication (Thompson et al. 2004), but the evidence in both countries is mixed. In Malaysia, the focus is narrow, linked to examination results. The master teachers all believe that they improve exam scores through innovative and creative teaching, but these are self-reported data and need to be treated with caution. The teachers and principals agree that master teachers should be effective teachers in their own classroom, with strong subject knowledge, and equipped with innovative and creative ways of teaching to inspire students, but these are normative comments and it is not clear whether the master teachers match these aspirations.

Despite their formal status as ‘technical experts’ (CMT3), most Philippine master teachers state that their classroom role is no different from other teachers, and one (SMT1) is disappointed that ‘master teachers are stuck in the classroom’. The principals confirm that they fulfil the same role as other teachers but also stress that they should have mastery of subject content (PB) and be instructional facilitators in the classroom (PV). In practice, however, some principals and a majority of teachers state that some master teachers do not fulfil these expectations.

The mixed evidence about the classroom performance of master teachers suggests that either the selection process is flawed or that master teachers may work harder to secure the job than in performing the role well once appointed.

**Subject Leadership**

Enacting the role of master teacher implies that they assume responsibility for subject development. This suggests working in classrooms and with teachers with the same subject specialism. Given that master teachers continue to teach their own classes, there is limited scope for them to have a direct impact on the classroom practice of their colleagues. Instead, they have to operate indirectly, through influence and higher order interpersonal skills. As Van Driel & Berry (2012) suggest, master teachers need to ‘contribute to the professional growth’ of other teachers.

In Malaysia, all the participating master teachers agree that their responsibility for improving their subject extends beyond their own classrooms to the whole school. However, their role in other classrooms is limited as they do not have formal authority vested in their positions and have to work through influence, a point also noted by Danielson (2006). Consequently, their work in other classrooms is achieved through indirect influence, not formal power, and they cannot ‘interfere’ in classroom teaching, as one principal noted. Their role is not to direct but to exert subtle influence on their colleagues. In practice, this means that their impact is greater on younger teachers and when they are respected by the other teachers. Being perceived as a role model is one way of generating such respect, as indicated in School 6. However, some teachers continue to resist what they might perceive to be ‘imposed improvement’, as noted by Montenicos et al. (2014) in Chile.

In the Philippines, there appears to be limited scope for master teachers to operate in other science rooms and laboratories, and their work with other teachers is largely responsive, providing assistance when asked to do so. The teachers also largely eschew the notion that master teachers help them with classroom practice. The principals generally paint a more positive picture of this aspect of master teachers’ work, pointing to technical assistance for teachers, coaching and mentoring, and monitoring curriculum implementation. This connects to Carolan & Guinn’s (2007) view that master teachers should be engaged in teacher development, notably through coaching and mentoring. However, there is no evidence that master teachers in either country are trained to develop these skills, as recommended by Patterson & Creasy (2005).
Whole-School Role

Master teachers in both countries have assumed, or been allocated, a range of whole-school roles, mostly unrelated to their specialist subjects. In Malaysia, these wider responsibilities comprise committee chairing roles, and professional development work, and these activities are deemed to be appropriate because master teachers have higher pay and status. However, this extra work might reduce their effectiveness as a subject specialist and leader. Spillane & Healey (2010) warn of the danger of ‘potentially competing responsibilities’ and there is clearly potential conflict between master teachers’ subject specialist roles and their more general work as school leaders.

Similarly, in the Philippines, most master teachers identify a wide range of additional responsibilities, such as chairing school committees, which go well beyond their specialist curriculum and teacher development roles. However, such roles may also be allocated to other teachers, suggesting that these functions are not specific to the master teacher role. In both countries, the wider work of master teachers in their schools is by no means confined to their specialist subject. This might be justified as a contribution to the overall aim of school improvement (Muijs & Harris 2007), or be seen as underutilising their specialist skills and knowledge.

Role Beyond their Own School

Much of the literature focuses on the internal school role of master teachers, with limited attention to external activities. This contrasts with the Malaysian data, which show that all participants are involved in district and state activities, notably in planning and implementing activities to help schools to improve their pass rates. The master teachers accepted this extra work because of the perceived prestige of doing so, but it creates problems at their own schools as other teachers have to cover their lessons, making it more difficult for master teachers to develop and sustain good relationships with their colleagues. Principals are also frustrated by this, but they have to comply with external directives in this highly centralised system. This has led some principals to discourage their teachers from applying for master teacher posts. This issue illustrates the challenges involved in balancing school and system priorities.

In the Philippines, master teachers’ external activity may relate to their specialist roles, notably preparing instructional materials, disseminating lesson plans and preparing action plans at the request of senior officials. Master teachers may also be consulted by science teachers in other schools. There is no clear pattern for this external work and it seems that their role is largely confined to their own schools.

Master Teachers as Teacher Leaders

Teacher leadership is perceived to be independent of formal roles, depending on influence rather than authority (Harris 2010), but Danielson (2006) shows that teacher leaders may be exercised by professionals holding formal roles as well as those without positional power. Johnson & Donaldson (2007) add that the latter group often struggled due to lack of legitimacy. Master teachers occupy the hinterland between formal and informal teacher leadership. In both Malaysia and the Philippines, their work is legitimised by their appointment to an established position with enhanced salary and status. However, they remain outside the hierarchy and have to build relationships, and earn respect, to exert their influence on colleagues, as also noted by Danielson (2006). It is clear that the advent of master teachers in both countries has succeeded in keeping talented and ambitious teachers in their classrooms, but their leadership role is patchy and depends on personal variables rather than school or system endorsement. The evidence from this cross-country study lends
support to Lambert’s (2003) view that teacher leadership has been ‘shackled’ by archaic definitions of leadership.

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The Impact of PISA on Education Governance: Some Insights from Highly Reactive Policy Contexts

Louis Volante

Abstract: International achievement testing programmes are increasingly being utilised as policy instruments to facilitate large-scale educational reforms. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which garners the most attention in policy spheres, has drawn criticism and provoked debate over its expanding role in educational governance issues. Critics have argued that PISA is damaging education worldwide by escalating standardised testing, emphasising a narrow range of measurable foci in education, and shifting educational policies to find short-term fixes designed to help a country climb the rankings. This article discusses the convergence debate and the continuum of policy responses that have been associated with the PISA triennial survey. Two distinct educational jurisdictions – Germany and Japan – are offered as cases that exemplify highly reactive policy contexts. The article concludes by examining the associated link between PISA, economic prosperity and the emergence of transnational governance.

Introduction

International achievement testing programmes highlight the educational differences that exist across national education systems, and policy-makers around the world are increasingly motivated to keep up with competitive standards within the global community (Morris 2011; Bernbaum & Moore 2012; OECD 2013; Duncan 2014). In Europe, one-third of countries have indicated a demand for more information on curriculum and teaching as a consequence of their results in international studies such as the Program in International Student Assessment (PISA) (Eurydice Network 2009). In Asia, high-achieving educational jurisdictions such as Shanghai-China, Hong Kong-China, Singapore, Japan and South Korea – which secure the top international scores in reading, mathematics and science – are serving as models to be emulated in other parts of the world, in what is more broadly noted as the policy-borrowing and/or transfer effect in education (Grek 2009; Ringarp & Rothland 2010; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow 2012; Carvalho & Costa 2014). In the USA, consistent performance below the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average in PISA has provided a rationale to intensify testing to improve school outcomes and/or to adopt reforms that emulate other high-performing educational systems (Wang, Beckett & Brown 2006; Mathis 2011; Guliz 2013; Turgut 2013). Even developing countries such as Brazil are increasingly turning to PISA to both identify problems and drive their educational reform initiatives.
(Bruns, Evans & Luque 2011). Many countries around the world are embarking on, or are already engaged in, significant large-scale reform initiatives that have been precipitated by international achievement studies, particularly PISA, which garners the most attention in the popular media. Indeed, the scope of the OECD’s influence in education is so pronounced that it has contributed to the formation of transnational policy networks (Morgan 2009).

**PISA Triennial Assessment Framework**

The OECD’s interest in education dates back to 1964, when member states first commissioned the gathering of statistics in the area of student achievement (Martens & Leibfried 2008). PISA was first administered in 2000 with the participation of 43 countries, and more than 70 economies signed up to participate in PISA in 2015. The triennial survey assesses the performance of 15-year-old students in the areas of mathematics, science and reading, in OECD member states and in a growing number of non-OECD countries and economies. The OECD asserts that the PISA survey ‘assesses the extent to which students near the end of compulsory schooling have acquired key knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in modern societies’ (OECD 2014a: 1). The current director of PISA, Andreas Schleicher, has indicated that the assessment results of these key knowledge and skills provide ‘policy-makers and practitioners with helpful tools to improve quality, equity and efficiency in education, by revealing some common characteristics of students, schools and education systems that do well’ (Schleicher 2007: 356). Not surprisingly, PISA has been referred to as ‘one of the largest non-experimental research exercises the world has even seen’ (Murphy 2014: 898).

An important feature of the PISA framework is that each of three ‘life skill’ domains – reading literacy, mathematical literacy and scientific literacy – is assigned as a major testing domain on a rotating format and, as a result, is assessed in greater detail. Table 1 summarises the timelines for the major and minor literacy emphases since the inception of the PISA survey in 2000.

**Table 1: Chronology of major and minor literacy domains in the PISA survey**

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<td>Mathematical literacy</td>
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<td>Scientific literacy</td>
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As indicated in Table 1, each literacy domain has been the major focus of assessment twice thus far. It takes three testing cycles, or nine years, to make cross-national comparisons in relation to a major literacy domain. In addition to the major and minor literacy domains, the OECD notes that PISA regularly introduces new tests to assess skills relevant to modern society, such as creative problem-solving and financial literacy (introduced in 2012), and collaborative problem-solving (introduced in 2015).

Other international achievement studies include the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS), and
the International Computer and Literacy Study (CIL), which focus on the achievement of fourth
and/or eighth grade students. The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational
Achievement (IEA) is responsible for the coordination of these international achievement testing
programmes. It is worth noting that the IEA has conducted international achievement testing for
a longer period than the OECD, with the initial administration of TIMSS taking place in 1995.
Nevertheless, PISA has quickly become the standard metric upon which most education systems
judge their relative standing. PISA has even been referred to as the ‘Olympics of education’ in
the popular media, particularly in developed nations (Petrelli & Winkler 2008; Scardino 2008;
Alphonso 2013).

PISA collects contextual information on the learning conditions of students which is designed
to shed more light on the complex interrelationships between social, cultural, economic and
educational factors associated with student achievement. These contextual surveys are intended
to help policy-makers identify student, classroom, school and national variables associated with
student achievement. The OECD makes positive statements on its website regarding the utility of
its international benchmark measure and its associated contextual surveys for informing national
education policy decisions. For example, the OECD states that the PISA survey allows educational
jurisdictions to evaluate education systems worldwide and provides valuable information to
participating countries so they are able to ‘set policy targets against measurable goals achieved by
other education systems, and learn from policies and practices applied elsewhere’ (OECD 2014a:
2). This statement underscores the potential role of policy borrowing/transfer from high- to low-
achieving educational jurisdictions. Nevertheless, the nature and degree of influence that PISA
exerts on global educational governance and policy formation remains highly contested (Pereyra,
Kothhoff & Cowen 2011; Kamens 2013; Meyer & Benavot 2013a; Sellar & Lingard 2013b).

The Convergence Debate

The debate surrounding international achievement studies and transnational educational
governance has grown steadily since the inception of these international surveys more than
20 years ago. The OECD asserts that international testing programmes such as PISA provide
national economies and the international community with invaluable student achievement data.
As previously noted, the OECD states that ‘countries and economies participating in successive
surveys can compare their students’ performance over time and assess the impact of education
policy decisions’ (OECD 2014a: para 5). It is important to note that the OECD’s statements also align
with those of the IEA. Similar to the OECD, the IEA asserts that TIMSS, PIRLS and CIS provide
high-quality data for evidence-based educational policy and reform. Collectively, these positive
statements from the international governing boards that coordinate the tests underscore the
potential contribution performance data can make to facilitating system improvement. Although
governments and senior policy-makers have not unanimously endorsed these objectives, the
prevailing sentiment of the participating economies is that these measures are indeed helpful in
informing their large-scale reform agendas. The academic community, particularly those focused
on education, has tended to dispute these positive ‘system improvement’ claims and has cast
serious doubt on the utility of international student assessment programmes, particularly PISA,
which has assumed priority status in debates of national education system reform.

The very nature of international testing programmes such as PISA suggests they do not celebrate
differences – they are more likely, according to academics, to produce convergence in what is seen
to be valuable in educational terms (Baird, Isaacs, Johnson, Stobart, Yu, Sprague & Daugherty 2011;
Benavot 2013; Meyer & Benavot 2013b). Academic condemnation of PISA has been widespread, as
evidenced by an open letter to the PISA director, Andreas Schleicher, from a group of more than 80 high-profile academics from around the world. The letter argues that PISA:

- shifts attention to short-term fixes designed to help a country quickly climb the rankings, despite research demonstrating that enduring changes in education practices take decades to come to fruition
- takes attention away from the less measurable or immeasurable educational objectives like physical, moral, civic and artistic development, thereby dangerously narrowing our collective view regarding the purpose of education
- is naturally biased in favour of the economic role of public schools versus how to prepare students for participation in democratic self-government, moral action and a life of personal development, growth, and wellbeing
- with its continuous cycle of global testing, harms children and adversely impacts classrooms, as it inevitably involves more and longer batteries of multiple-choice testing, more scripted ‘vendor’-made lessons, and less professional autonomy for teachers. In this way, PISA has further increased stress level in schools, which endangers the wellbeing of students and teachers (Andrews 2014).

The letter concludes with a call to halt the next round of PISA testing in 2015. Interestingly, these points were reiterated in another open letter, the list of signatories to which grew from the initial 80 to more than 130, as of 6 May 2014 (Meyer et al. 2014b).

The OECD rejects arguments that PISA or other educational comparison measures have caused a shift to short-term fixes in education policy. Andreas Schleicher even responded directly to the open letter by arguing that PISA provides ‘many opportunities for more strategic policy design’ (Schleicher 2014: 878). He has been a vocal advocate of the PISA survey, noting that it has created valuable opportunities for transnational policy collaboration and should be credited with promoting high levels of student learning outcomes (Schleicher 2009). The OECD provides support for their system-improvement rationale by noting how countries like Germany have made ‘observable steady progress every three years’ through the use of PISA (OECD 2014b: 878). The counter-argument, widely endorsed by academics, acknowledges that some countries have shown rapid progress in the PISA rankings, but it is precisely this narrow focus that impoverishes educational systems by promoting educational uniformity (Corbett 2008; Goldstein 2014; Meyer et al. 2014a).

Collectively, the various concerns and academic criticisms underscore the negative consequences of the PISA rankings and the convergence of educational governance and policies around the globe that follows from an emphasis on such international studies (Meyer 2014; Meyer et al. 2014b).

The criticism that PISA has created a hegemonic grip on policy-making and strategic planning priorities (Kell & Kell 2010) is mainly contested between international testing bodies and the academic community. It is difficult to reconcile these opposing views – one suggests international achievement studies are vital for system improvement and strategic policy design (OECD 2014b), while the other notes the deleterious effects of PISA testing (Meyer et al. 2014b). Despite the rhetoric that is often associated with this contentious topic, few would argue that PISA exerts a uniform impact on educational policies across the globe. Rather, it is the complex interplay of political, economic, social and educational issues within particular historical periods and national contexts that create the conditions that facilitate policy-borrowing and/or transfer effects in response to international achievement studies such as PISA. Moreover, the nature and degree of potential policies and initiatives connected to PISA should be viewed along a continuum, as evidenced by
the research of Breakspear (2012) and other scholars who have investigated this phenomena in select educational jurisdictions (Bieber & Martens 2011; Heyneman & Lee 2013).

It should be conceded that curricula across the globe have always been directly defined and prescribed, to some extent, through the influence of international organisations such as the World Bank and the United Nations (Benavot, Cha, Kamens, Meyer & Wong 1991). Given that the influence of PISA is growing, we need to better understand the prominent rationales guiding large-scale reform and the emergence of transnational governance in a world that increasingly emphasises performance measures.

The Continuum of Policy Responses to PISA

A wide range of policy responses to international achievement studies occur within distinct educational contexts; a report by Baird et al. (2011) supports this claim. In their ‘short pilot project’ analysis of six national education systems – England, France, Canada, Norway, Shanghai-China and Switzerland – the authors noted ‘very different policy responses seem to have resulted from reactions to PISA’ (p. 2). They point out that although some countries – such as France and Norway – have suffered shocks in reaction to PISA test results, the relationship between substantive policy content and PISA results was not always immediately apparent in the national cases they examined. Martens & Niemann (2013) made a similar finding in their comparative analysis of Germany and the USA – while Americans were faced with similarly poor results, PISA did not trigger public discussion or reform in education policy as it did in Germany. These authors further note the differential impact of PISA results within countries such as Canada, Poland, and Great Britain – whose media paid comparatively less attention to the OECD study – and within countries such as Spain, Mexico, and Austria, where broader media coverage occurred.

Breakspear’s (2012) detailed research study also supports the general finding that PISA provokes a diverse array of policy responses. His analysis, which was conducted for the OECD, included 37 countries. One of the most interesting aspects of Breakspear’s study is an index that was developed to assess the degree to which PISA informed policy-making. This was rated for each country as either ‘not very’, ‘moderately’, ‘very’, or ‘extremely’, based on scores between 0-14 on this index. Although there are limitations with the construction of the index and the calculation of the composite scores, the policy index results underscore how some countries might be more reactive to the PISA survey than others. Overall, Breakspear’s (2012) exploration of the normative effects of international benchmarking found that the PISA international rankings led to, or inspired, changes in 19 countries/economies and partly led to change in an additional 11 countries/economies. Thus, over 80 per cent of the countries examined reported some degree of influence on their educational policies, albeit on a continuum.

Pons (2012) conducted an analysis of national PISA debates in countries including France, French-speaking Belgium, Hungary, Portugal, Romania and Scotland. One of his main conclusions was that PISA’s main impacts on national debates between 2001 and 2008 were in revealing the pre-established opinions of stakeholders; legitimising pre-existing positions through science; and justifying large-scale reforms which were, to a large extent, already prepared or desired by the providing political leaders, even if these positions and reforms were sometimes contradictory and

1 Australia, Austria, Belgium (French and Flemish Communities), Canada, Chile, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong-China, Hungary, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Singapore, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the UK (England, Scotland and Wales), and the USA.
hardly based on the PISA survey or the interpretations that it could reasonably be said to enable (Pons 2012). Why some educational jurisdictions have ignored their poor results, while others have been highly reactive by initiating a sweeping set of reform proposals (Wiseman 2013), is addressed in the next section.

Reactive Systems
As evidenced by the discussion above, some educational jurisdictions seem to be more reactive to PISA than others. This section discusses two distinct contexts in which significant large-scale reforms have been initiated in response to PISA: Germany and Japan. These jurisdictions were chosen for both the scale of the educational reforms initiated in response to PISA and the diversity of relative global performance they exemplify. Each of the national profiles briefly highlights the nature of these large-scale reforms and their corresponding impact on educational governance issues within their respective western and eastern nation.

German PISA Shock
The first PISA survey in 2000 revealed that German students were significantly below the OECD average in all three of the tested areas – reading, mathematics and science – with global rankings of 22nd, 21st, and 21st, respectively. Even more troubling was the finding that in the initial PISA survey, Germany possessed one of the highest levels of performance variation within OECD countries and that this variation was strongly influenced by socio-economic background (Ertl 2006; Mostafa 2010). ‘PISA shock’ dominated the media and suggested that das Land der Dichter und Denker (‘the land of poets and thinker’) was in disarray (Ringarp & Rothland 2010). Almost immediately, education policy moved to the forefront of public attention, with ‘PISA’ becoming a catchphrase to describe the poor state of the German education system (Fuchs & Woessmann 2004). What followed was a set of reforms that has been characterised as the greatest shift in national educational policies to occur since the fall of the Soviet Union (Bank 2013). Fairly rapidly, the German education system changed from its traditional approach that placed high value on Bildung, the general-liberal education of students, and on didactics, which places sole responsibility for the enactment of educational goals and assessment on professional teachers (Yore, Anderson & Chiu 2010).

The German landscape was quickly revamped with the introduction of national education standards, centralised examinations and assessments, and education monitoring structures for evaluation purposes – essentially an evidence-based policy-making orientation (Ertl 2006; Neumann, Fischer & Kauertz 2010; Bank 2013). PISA ushered in a whole new conceptualisation of the German school as a self-managing organisation in need of rigorous quality control measures – school inspections, self-evaluations, centralised assessments and teacher professionalization – applied in different combinations by the 16 federal states, or Länder (Grek 2009). Successful reform would largely be achieved through a series of measures designed to develop and assure the quality of teaching and schools on the basis of binding educational standards and results-oriented evaluation (Rubin 2014).

The introduction of national education standards had a profound impact on the curriculum and signalled a shift from competence-based to content-based instruction (Brozo, Valtin, Garbe, Sulkunen, Shiel & Pandian 2012). Established in all key subject areas, these educational standards:

- built on the basic principles of the relevant school subject
- described relevant subject-specific competences, including bodies of knowledge which students should acquire by a specific point in time
aimed at systematic and interlinked learning and followed the principle of cumulative competence formation
• described expected achievements of the students in the framework of pre-determined areas of competence
• aimed at a medium level of competence
• are illustrated by examples of tasks and problems (KMK 2005: 6)

Overall, the new national educational standards adopted in Germany determined which competences pupils should develop, with the achievement of the education system measured in terms of its success in forming these individual competences (Ertl 2006; Grubera 2006).

Why Germany had such a pronounced reaction to PISA – in what is now commonly referred to as ‘PISA shock’ – is a question that continues to provoke debate within and outside this European nation (Waldow 2009; Pons 2011). Martens & Niemann (2010) contend that between late-1970s and mid-1990s, prior to the release of the first PISA report, Germany was resistant to ‘external shocks’ simply because it did not participate in any international evaluations. Thus, Germany did not have a tradition of evaluating its education system or relating its educational performance to other countries through comparative studies. PISA served as the catalyst for Germany to embrace an output orientation and a culture of comparison in educational policy-making. Political eagerness to initiate reforms was partly motivated by the desire to demonstrate strong leadership in the face of public opinion sparked by PISA and its aftermath (Rotte & Rotte 2007). Overall, Germany’s lacklustre PISA results occurred during a time when education was re-envisioned as a significant ‘natural resource’ (Martens & Niemann 2010). The evaluation of academic performance under the lens of economic prosperity soon replaced the traditional German view that education should serve as a means to guarantee social cohesion and to cultivate self-refinement (Knodel, Martens & Niemann 2013). Germany essentially embraced a neoliberal approach that juxtaposes outputs (i.e. student achievement) and education policies – an approach consistent with the neoliberal interests of the OECD (Uljens 2007).

Any assessment of the net impact of the sweeping set of German reforms precipitated by PISA is largely dependent on who is consulted. In general, German policy-makers are celebrating the rise of student achievement from below the OECD average in 2000 to above the average in the most recent survey administration in 2012, with global rankings of 19th in reading, 12th in science, and 16th in mathematics. Even more importantly, government officials are quick to point out that Germany is one of only three countries that have improved in both mathematics performance and equity since 2003. Academic praise for the reforms is more tempered, and cautions abound that the OECD’s PISA survey has degraded the ‘autonomous professionalism’ of German schools and teachers and has exerted ‘pedagogic pressure’ to perform (Hartong 2012). Collectively, the pressures associated with curricular and pedagogical reforms have been criticised for placing undue stress on students, parents and teachers (Munch 2014). Rotte & Rotte (2007) draw a causal link between the new pedagogical pressures and statistics showing that 50 per cent of all teachers quit their jobs before reaching the official pension age. Despite persistent teacher shortages, post-PISA Germany has been firmly reoriented to empirische Unterrichtsforschung, a greater emphasis on empirical research of pedagogical practice (Ertl 2006).
Japanese PISA Resurgence

If the mediocre performance of Germany provoked shock, then the fluctuations in Japanese performance promoted increased unease within this Asian nation. Table 2 outlines Japan’s PISA rankings and scaled scores from 2000-2012.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 2: Chronology of Japanese PISA rankings and scaled scores</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>PISA 2000</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading literacy</td>
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<td>Mathematical literacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scientific literacy</td>
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It is important to note that the figures in brackets indicate the scaled scores. Taken together, these results suggest a U-shaped distribution with stronger performance in the initial administrations, relatively weaker performance in the middle administrations, and improved results in the most recent administration. In a sense, Japan is enjoying a resurgence in their relative global standing – a result that Japanese policy-makers will directly attribute to large-scale reforms precipitated by PISA.

Prompted by slumping scores, Japan embarked on a set of reform proposals with the aim of replicating the initial Finnish dominance of PISA (Watanabe 2005; Takayama 2009). In particular, PISA impacted Japanese education policy through the promotion and development of reading skills, the implementation of an annual national achievement test, and reform of the national curriculum (Ninomiya & Urabe 2011). Reading skills were targeted as a priority area through legislative bills such as the Fundamental Plan for Promotion of Reading (2001) and the Program for Improving Reading Literacy (2005). Similarly, the national achievement test directly examined application skills and competencies aligned with success in PISA. It is worth noting that schools and boards are required to publicise their improvement plans and performance reviews on the basis of the data drawn from the national achievement test (Takayama 2013). Lastly, the modified national curriculum emphasised students’ abilities to think, judge and express – skills directly referenced by PISA.

Not surprisingly, many (if not all) of these reforms are attributed to socio-political factors, signalling a shift to a more centralised model for making school-related decisions (Ho 2006). Takayama (2008) contends that the 2003 PISA results resonated with the specific cultural, political and economic context of the time, and were used by Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to legitimise highly contentious policy measures. More specifically, he notes how the controversial yutori (low pressure) curriculum policy was redirected and how the Ministry used PISA to re-establish legitimacy in a time of increasing neoliberal state restructuring. Takayama further notes that both the yutori reform and the introduction of national achievement testing were under consideration by MEXT prior to the release of the 2003 PISA results. It should also be conceded that the Japanese media played an active role in attributing falls in PISA achievement to the yutori policy, which reduced the number of school hours and the educational content in curriculum guidelines by as much as 30 per cent (Knipprath 2010). All three national newspapers – Yomiuri, Asahi and Nikkei – provided extensive, some would argue excessive, coverage of the PISA 2003 results. Thus, Japan’s reforms, similar to those in Germany, were both aided by the popular media and a neoliberal political agenda espousing the importance of testing and national competitiveness.
PISA, Economic Prosperity, and Transnational Governance

Ever since national education systems first emerged in the 19th century, nation states have monitored educational conditions in foreign countries that are perceived as economically superior (Waldow, Takayama & Sung 2014). Perhaps national performance in PISA, or what might be termed a nation states’ ‘gross domestic performance’ (GDPer), may eventually parallel the economic measures such as gross domestic product (GDP) that are well-established metrics of national prosperity. Just as GDP may indicate success or failure of national economic policies, GDPer may become the ultimate litmus test for the success or failure of national education policies. The relevance of the knowledge and skills measured by PISA for future educational success and even for success in the labour market is confirmed, according to the OECD, by longitudinal studies in a growing number of countries (OECD 2009). Indeed, the OECD has successfully linked the discourse of education to economic issues and has thus created public demand for political reforms in underachieving educational jurisdictions (Niemann 2009; Trohler 2014). Wealthy democracies that fear their fortunes might be fading seem to be most susceptible to what economists have aptly termed ‘PISA envy’ (The Economist 2013). Not surprisingly, critics argue that PISA test scores are not a good measure of economic potential (Bracey 2009) and, as such, PISA envy is an unnecessary distraction and a misguided preoccupation.

Once might naturally wonder whether the key competencies (KC}s) measured by PISA actually translate into increased economic prosperity. Despite suggestions from the OECD, this is an area of analytic inquiry that requires further attention, and is addressed by a branch of social sciences referred to as the ‘economics of education’. Certainly, intelligence is a well-known determinant of economic outcomes, and schooling is an important enhancer of cognitive abilities (Rindermann 2008), but the causal link between education and economic prosperity is mediated by a number of intervening variables that reside outside of K-12 schools. Despite these methodological considerations, it is clear that the KCs that underpin PISA are being adopted by supranational organisations such as the European Union and are increasingly being integrated into the national curricular policies of advanced industrial nations with the aim of improving human capital (Takayama 2013), that is, the sum of the knowledge, skills and dispositions that individually and collectively produce economic value in the new global economy (Fitzsimons 1999). Bank (2012) argues that meaningful economic interpretations of PISA data can only be obtained with the help of a huge range of strong assumptions. He goes on to note that it is easy for politicians to use or misuse the PISA data to justify any policy and to avoid difficult debates on pedagogical issues of education and schooling that might put their ideological objectives at risk. This line of reasoning essentially suggests that political motivations for large-scale educational reforms may be couched within unsubstantiated economic rationales.

Although the relationship between education and economic growth is likely unassailable to some extent, the position put forward by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) seems to be the most balanced. The UNESCO report on culture, education, and development notes that ‘the cultural dimensions of human life are possibly more essential than growth … Education, for example, promotes economic growth and is therefore of instrumental value, and at the same time is an essential part of cultural development, with intrinsic value. Hence we cannot reduce culture to a subsidiary position as a mere promoter of economic growth’ (UNESCO 1996: 14). Thus, education systems worldwide seem to be faced with dual, and at times competing, roles: developing an educated citizenship through a holistic approach that is attentive to intellectual, physical, civic and cultural development and positioning nation states for the challenges of the 21st century global economy.
It is unlikely that any particular large-scale assessment measure, devised by the OECD or any other international organisation, could possibly measure the cumulative impact of education on intellectual, physical, civic and cultural development. Although leagues tables that summarise and rank nations on student achievement are an everyday occurrence, an index to rank nations on other key aspects of education, particularly cultural development, have yet to gain momentum and traction worldwide. Nor are they likely to do so in the foreseeable future, given the reliability, validity and bias issues that would undoubtedly follow their widespread release. Thus, there are both essential and unmeasurable aspects of public education that defy simple quantification or evaluation. It is a bitter irony that the areas of the curriculum that have the most pronounced influence on cultural development, such as the arts, are increasingly marginalised in education jurisdictions that place a strong emphasis on standardised testing.

The international community will need to be vigilant that the growth of PISA does not come at the expense of non-tested subject matter. Certainly, there is expansive body of research which suggests the latter is more likely to occur in policy contexts that emphasise large-scale assessments and standards-based reforms (Volante 2012). Ultimately, it is school leaders and teachers that will have to balance these competing interests within their schools and classrooms so that they satisfy multiple goals from multiple stakeholders – policymakers, district leaders, parents, students and community groups. Nevertheless, transnational policy networks need to guard against a reductionist approach to the broader purposes of education that collapse the mission and rationale of compulsory public education into the attainment of narrow performance and outcome statements (Kell & Kell 2010). Indeed, few measurement and evaluation experts would suggest the cumulative contribution of a nations’ education system could be reduced to a scaled score, no matter how robust the measure.

Final Thoughts

Transnational education bodies such as the OECD now form the most powerful group within the ‘education’ discourse and have made the concept of human capital the dominant paradigm (Munch 2014). The preceding discussion suggests that the relationship between PISA and human capital is nuanced and complicated, particularly when one considers national education policymaking in highly reactive systems. Although Shanghai-China and other Asian systems such as Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea have quickly replaced Finland as the new reference societies for educational system research and policy borrowing (Ma, Jong & Yuan 2013; Sellar & Lingard 2013a), extrapolating ‘lessons’ from one education jurisdiction to another is mediated by cultural differences and the socio-political forces that are prevalent during particular historical periods. Indeed, it would be fairly easy to find jurisdictions very comparable to Germany and Japan but whose ‘mediocre’ or ‘fluctuating’ performance did not provoke similar national reforms. Future studies on the impact of PISA on educational governance must juxtapose educational issues against the complex interplay of political, economic and social issues to understand how and when education systems become ‘highly receptive’ systems to large-scale reform. In essence, the most robust relationship between PISA and national policy-making might be less about performance and numbers, and more about national context and historical timing.
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International Studies in Educational Administration

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