Making a Difference in Challenging, High-Poverty Schools: Successful principals in the USA, England, and Australia

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This article draws on findings from a larger international study and the literature to examine successful principals of challenging high-poverty schools in the USA, England, and Australia. Specifically, this article reports case-study findings for 13 challenging schools, 4 each in the USA and Australia and 5 in England. Findings from this study indicate that successful principals used similar leadership practices and traits to make a difference and improve student performance in very challenging schools. These findings extend previous research conducted in single-nation contexts. The presentation of findings also considers differences in the role of the principal, the school context, and larger national policies. The article concludes with implications for leadership training and future research.

Introduction

Research indicates that high levels of poverty can interfere with a school’s ability to successfully improve student achievement (e.g., Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Some of the correlates of poverty that research has associated with poor academic achievement include: poor nutrition, inadequate health services, and high rates of illiteracy and criminal behavior, which in turn can result in high rates of student...
transience, absence, and indiscipline. Teachers in high-poverty schools are often hard-pressed to maintain curricula coherence and continuity when students are moving in and out of their classrooms or disrupting their instruction. Poor aggregate student performance in such high-poverty schools is not a surprising outcome and, until recently, often dismissed as a problem too big for public education to address.

However, current legislation in the USA, England, and Australia holds all schools accountable for the success of all children, regardless of the social contexts in which they are situated. It is not the purview of this paper to examine or debate the political ideologies underlying the accountability movement, but rather to understand the leadership practices of those who are successfully navigating the challenges of the movement—effective principals and headteachers of high-poverty, culturally diverse schools in the USA, England, and Australia. To date, some researchers have examined effective leadership in such schools; however, all of these studies focused on single-nation contexts, and many were conducted prior to the enactment of current accountability policies. In an ongoing study entitled “International Successful School Principal Project (ISSPP)” we found among our larger sample of 65 schools in Australia, Canada, China, Denmark, England, Norway, Sweden, and the USA, 13 high-poverty elementary schools in which student outcomes improved since the beginning of their current principal’s tenure.

This article reports case-study findings for these 13 schools, 4 each in the USA and Australia and 5 in England. By examining these schools, we are making an a priori argument that at least some of each school’s improvement can be attributed to the principal’s leadership. In the 13 schools studied, we found that principals often demonstrated similar leadership traits and practices. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to report what a rather diverse set of principals in the USA, England, and Australia did “successfully” to make a difference in the performance of the children in their challenging, high-poverty elementary schools.

In the first four sections of this article we: (1) discuss changing demographics and increasing accountability pressures that have created a renewed interest in effective school leadership; (2) review the literature on effective leadership in challenging contexts, focusing on four core practices (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005) that helped us explain successful leadership of challenging schools across three national contexts; (3) describe the research methodology used and the U.S., English, and Australian cases; and (4) identify themes that cut across national contexts and those that distinguish one site from another. We conclude this article with implications for principal preparation and further research.

Leadership Under Changing Contexts in the USA, England, and Australia

Changing Demographics

Over the past 2 decades, educators in the USA, England, and Australia have experienced changing demographics accompanied by an increase in accountability mandates and renewed calls for school reform. Data from all three countries reveal
population increases due primarily to immigration. In the USA, for example, almost two thirds (64%) of all foreign-born residents arrived subsequent to 1980, most coming from non-English speaking nations (Spring, 2004). Half of Britain’s population growth between 1991 and 2001 was due to immigration and, by 2001, 7.5% of that nation’s population was born outside the British Isles. Similarly, much of Australia’s population increase is due to immigration (41% in 1999), with a quarter of the population born overseas and from more diverse regions of the world since the mid-1990s than in the early-1980s.

One consequence of these immigration patterns is an increase in cultural diversity. In the USA, it is projected that by the year 2050 the percent of the overall population that is Hispanic will grow from 9% to 25% (making it the largest minority group) and the percent Asian will grow from 3% to 8%. During this same period, the percent Black will remain relatively stable, increasing only slightly from 12% to 14%, while Whites will decline sharply from 76% to 53%. These changes are particularly evident in high-poverty urban schools that are increasingly serving a majority, “minority” student population that are among America’s poorest citizens (Frankenburg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003). The National Condition of Education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002) reports that almost 30% of all school-age children (5 – 17 years old) live in households with an annual income below the poverty level; a figure Frankenburg et al. (2003) contend markedly underestimates the magnitude of the problem in urban communities.

Increased Accountability

In addition to changing demographics, increased accountability has had a major impact on the work of principals/headteachers in all three countries. The earliest of these mandates occurred in England with the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA). Accountability in ERA lies within a framework of national curriculum goals and standards, high-stakes testing, and open enrollments that use market approaches to reward schools for increased student numbers. The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) inspects schools every 4 years. Inspectors have sweeping powers over school leadership and management, as well as student academic performance, and their reports are made public along with examination results that appear as league tables in the press. Schools can be put under review, reconstituted, or closed as a result of these reports.

Similar accountability policies emerged in Australia during the 1990s; however, this initial accountability movement occurred at state and territory levels (with some implications for variation from one state to another). Most states and territories introduced new accountability systems where schools are monitored by a combination of self-evaluation and external review processes. In Victoria, where three of the case studies are located, there is a differentiated review system based on the overall performance of the school over the past 3 years. Schools judged as underperforming are required to undergo more intensive reviews. The review process is supported by extensive information that includes data on student achievement; student
demographics; parent and student opinion; organizational health (staff opinion); and student retention, attendance and destination. Comparison data for state averages and like-school averages (categorization based upon measures of poverty and ethnicity) are provided for most datasets. Most states/territories provide for more intensive reviews of underperforming schools. In 2000, the federal and state/territory governments agreed to national literacy and numeracy testing for Years 3, 5, and 7, and recently the federal government (2005) required all states/territories (through financial sanctions) to adopt new reporting standards for all parents. Currently, a National Curriculum is being proposed to achieve uniform standards across Australia.

As a result of the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), schools in the USA also operate in a context of standardized testing accountability and public visibility. In New York State (where the U.S. case sites are located), school report cards are published annually to track the performance and progress of students on standardized achievement tests and to compare these results with similar schools around the state. Should a school consistently underperform in terms of the percentage of students reaching mastery on standardized tests, it is subject to sanctions, the most severe being named a School Under Registration Review (SURR). Although being a SURR school brings additional support and technical assistance, it can often stigmatize a school; potentially causing parents to reconsider where they choose to live in order to educate their children, which in turn can have a negative effect on real property values and thus the fiscal support available to schools in that community. Since specific accountability mandates vary from one state to another, terms such as SURR do not apply universally in the USA, but the basic consequences do, that is, underperforming schools are publicly identified for sanctions.

Organizational Reforms

Over the past 20 years, principals in the USA, England, and Australia have had to implement reforms aimed at such things as increasing teacher empowerment, flattening the hierarchy to permit greater site-based management and more parent and community involvement in decision-making, as well as greater utilization of emergent information and communication technologies. In England, for instance, ERA introduced Local Management of Schools (LMS), which gave headteachers greater autonomy over their resources and other school decisions while holding them accountable for student performance results.

For the past 2 decades, organizational decentralization has also been a prominent feature of Australian education (albeit with some variation across regions). Victoria (Australia’s second largest school system) was a forerunner in the development of school self-management. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed continuous and radical change in Victoria’s school system, culminating in the Schools of the Future program in 1993, which introduced large-scale reorganization and the decentralization of numerous functions central to schools, including local selection of staff, control over
the school budget, the articulation of school goals in a school charter, and the design of a framework for accountability. By 1997, self-management had been extended to all schools and the Victorian system was regarded as one of the most far-reaching examples of this anywhere in the world (Caldwell, Gurr, Hill, & Rowe, 1997).

Following the lead of Australia and England, many states and school districts in America mandated similar forms of self-management. Most often, principals are expected to make decisions with a governance council composed of parents, teachers’ union members, and sometimes community members and students. Like Australia, there is some variation among U.S. state-level policies aimed at decentralization. Unlike Australia and England, however, U.S. principals are not accountable for their abilities to increase participatory decision-making or distribute leadership throughout their schools.

Although U.S. reforms may have increased participation in decision-making, they also may have destabilized some school cultures (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). Leithwood and Riehl (2005) contend that when organizational cultures are relatively stable, they can be maintained through leadership substitutes such as local and state policies (Firestone, 1996; Pitner, 1986). But when schools become less stable and take on the characteristics of a “frontier culture,” community members may seek strong formal leadership in order to reestablish coherence and direction. Because principals are formally assigned the role and responsibilities of leadership, it is to them that most turn when schools confront instability. As such, instability created by demographic change, accountability policies, and organizational reforms have renewed interest in the effects of school leadership, especially as it pertains to pupil performance in high-poverty schools, where student achievement is often lowest.

Effective Leadership in Challenging Schools: Research from the USA, England, and Australia

In the USA, studies of leadership in effective urban elementary schools were conducted as long ago as the late 1970s (e.g., Edmonds, 1979; Lezotte, 1997; Louis & Miles, 1990; Purkey & Smith, 1983). The effective schools research, as it came to be known, examined successful “outliers” – those high-achieving schools that primarily serve low-socioeconomic populations. Effective schools research (e.g., Edmonds, 1979; Lezotte, 1997; Louis & Miles, 1990; Purkey & Smith, 1983) identified strong, even directive, instructional leadership as the role of the principal. Instructional leaders focused all efforts on the improvement of classroom practices through the creation of safe, orderly, and positive school environments, a clear and focused mission, high performance expectations, student time on task, and positive home-school relations (e.g., Lezotte, 1997; Louis & Miles, 1990; Purkey & Smith, 1983).

More recently, Harris (2002) studied effective headteachers in challenging UK schools and found leadership practices that aligned with U.S. effective schools research (Louis & Miles, 1990; Purkey & Smith, 1983). Further, Harris (2002) suggested that headteachers used more directive or authoritarian leadership styles in
schools with serious problems; however, some headteachers also exhibited some development toward democratic leadership. Similar studies in Victoria (Australia) schools provided a view of principal leadership that was primarily democratic, but also directive and purposeful during early stages of school improvement (Caldwell, 1998). The Australian studies further suggested that, while the heroic leadership model was able to make an early impact, “distributed leadership” was necessary for sustained improvement (Maden, 2001; Mulford & Silins, 2003).

From these and many other leadership studies, Leithwood and Riehl (2005) found that even in the most challenging school contexts, effective leaders exhibit four core practices that are necessary, but insufficient, for success: (1) setting directions, (2) developing people, (3) redesigning the organization, and (4) managing the instructional program. In the next several paragraphs, we highlight each of these core practices in more detail, because we found these constructs useful to explain our findings about successful principals of challenging, high-poverty schools in the USA, England, and Australia.

**Setting Direction**

In order to set the direction, leaders develop and communicate shared goals, a sense of common purpose, and high performance expectations (e.g., Marsh, 2002; Petrides & Guiney, 2002). In challenging schools, this requires that achievable goals be set, often beginning with improvements in the physical environment. The effective schools research revealed that in the USA, principals focused on the creation of “safe and orderly school environments” and the establishment of high expectations for all children (Lezotte, 1997). In the UK, Harris (2002) found, “In a failing school context, immediate action is required and hence, leadership often directive and task focused while setting the vision for school improvement” (p. 17). Direction setting by principals in challenging Australian schools was characterized as more of a shared responsibility and distributed leadership; however, the principals’ first directions also typically concerned improvement of the physical school environment as well as student behavior (Maden, 2001; Mulford & Silins, 2003).

**Developing People**

Effective leaders offer their teachers intellectual stimulation and individualized support (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). But in challenging schools, which often have fewer resources for professional development, leaders must rely on their own expertise in the technical core of schooling. In the U.S. literature, such principals were depicted as strong instructional leaders whose expert knowledge of curriculum and instructional practices served as the “pedagogical lighthouse” for the school (Edmonds, 1979). These principals were described as “knee-deep” in professional development activities, often modeling effective instructional techniques in classrooms. Harris (2002) found that headteachers of high-poverty schools in the UK invested personal time and resources in developing their staff. Likewise,
according to Australian researchers (Maden, 2001; Mulford & Silins, 2003), principals actively developed teachers in the use of research-based intervention strategies proven to improve academic performance of low-achieving students.

Redesigning the Organization

Principals of challenging schools in all three countries were frequently depicted as authoritarian or directive as they sought to bring order to chaos in their schools, but after safety and an improved physical environment were assured, they became more democratic and redesigned their schools as professional learning communities (Caldwell et al., 1997; Harris, 2002; Rosenholtz, 1985). In so doing, these principals modified existing school structures and processes to increase professional collaboration and dialogue among teachers and to improve home-school relationships. Effective English principals distributed leadership to teams (Harris, 2002), while the Australian principals established collaborative processes to increase teacher and parent participation in school improvement decisions (Caldwell, 1998; Maden, 2001; Mulford & Silins, 2003). American principals deliberately changed the nature of task assignments and routine procedures to increase professional dialogue around school goals (e.g., Purkey & Smith, 1983; Rosenholtz, 1985).

Managing the Instructional Program

Successful principals manage curriculum and instructional improvement through four practices: staffing schools with teachers well matched to school priorities, providing instructional support, monitoring school activity, and buffering staff from distractions to protect instructional time (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). Other authors also advise principals to foster teacher leadership by modeling appropriate instructional leadership behaviors and inviting teachers to share the responsibility for curriculum innovation (e.g., Jackson, 2000; Marks & Printy, 2003).

These aggregated findings suggest the emergence of a common lexicon of theoretical constructs related to effective leadership in challenging schools. As Leithwood and Riehl (2005) noted, four characteristics and practices seeming to matter the most: (1) setting directions that secure the physical environment and achieve high academic standards, (2) developing people to use effective instructional strategies and interventions, (3) redesigning the organization to include teachers and parents in decision-making, and (4) managing the curriculum effectively by staffing the school with teachers who align with the mission and direction and buffering them from distractions. These commonalities also suggest the need for the type of cross-national analysis undertaken in the ISSPP to determine if researchers are uncovering the same operational practices that characterize the work of successful principals confronting challenging school environments around the world. Before we discuss how these constructs were manifest in our cross-national examination, we briefly describe the research methods and design of the ISSPP study.
Research Methodology

Procedures and Data Sources

The ISSPP utilized a multi-case-study methodology to gather contextually sensitive data concerning individuals’ perceptions about the work of their principal, because case studies provide an opportunity to uncover causation through “insight, discovery and interpretation” (Merriam, 1988, p. 10). Purposive sampling using common criteria was employed in selecting schools in each country. Specifically, sites were chosen based on student performance on state or national standardized tests that exceeded expectations, principals’ exemplary reputations in the community and/or school system, and other indicators of success that were both site-specific and initiated during the principal’s tenure. Thus, this secondary analysis of school leadership in challenging schools, similar to the ISSPP itself, rests upon an a priori and mainly circumstantial argument that, if school improvement occurred during a principal’s watch, then s/he may have had some hand in making it possible. Our objective, therefore, was to determine through semistructured interviews, using a common protocol developed from our review of the literature on effective school leadership (reviewed above), whether teachers, support staff, parents, students, and the principals themselves believed the principal had played a central role in the school’s success, and if so, what had s/he done to make it happen?

We interviewed each principal twice, asking them to describe the leadership practices they believed were most effective in advancing student achievement in their challenging schools. Other data sources included ethnographic fieldnotes, interviews with other study participants (teachers, parents, and students), and site documents (i.e., minutes of meetings, press reports, and other public documents illustrating school and student achievement). These additional data sources provided a contextual reference and enhanced trustworthiness of each principal’s interview narrative (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lather, 1991).

It is important to note that the ISSPP study investigators collected data simultaneously using a common instrument with the express purpose of making cross-national comparisons across eight different countries. Before ISSPP, the studies (reviewed above) were single nation and then assumptions were made across contexts when commonalities were found across studies. Our data analysis procedures began with an examination of the data within each country and then across countries. While our national and cross-national analyses focused on Leithwood and Riehl’s (2005) theoretical constructs developed from single-nation studies, we remained open to the emergence of other themes and negative evidence about that common lexicon of constructs. Further, we conducted member checks throughout the process of data collection and analysis to allow study participants to comment on our emerging interpretations.

From the original 65 cases in the ISSPP dataset, we selected for this analysis a subset of 13 schools that were both high poverty and elementary in order to focus our
examination more specifically on successful leadership in the most challenging socioeconomic environments (high poverty) and at the level (elementary) studied most often in the prior research. Unfortunately, by reducing our sample to a fifth of its original size, findings from these unique social entities are intended primarily to be descriptive and not necessarily transferable to other contexts; therefore, generalizations must be made with caution. Nevertheless, as we shall see, certain patterns of leadership practice that emerged from these cases are consistent with those found in the prior research (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005) and thus could help improve other schools confronting challenging conditions. Interestingly, these principals also demonstrated similar traits or dispositions that were important for successful leadership in challenging schools but not specifically identified in prior effective leadership studies (e.g., Caldwell, 1998; Harris, 2002; Lezotte, 1997; Potter, Reynolds, & Chapman, 2002). In the next section, we discuss our findings with contextually rich examples of how these practices and traits look in challenging U.S., Australian, and British schools.

Findings

Tables 1–3 report information about the schools studied and their respective principals for each country. Variations exist in how certain factors are reported across the three national tables due to the focus of the national research teams (e.g., the Australian cases report faculty size, the size of a school’s leadership team, and the principal’s gender, while the English and U.S. cases focus more on the principal’s background including such variables as gender, age, and prior experience). Perhaps more important is the inter- and intranational variation in school demographics. For example, enrollments in the U.S. schools are considerably higher than in their Australian and English counterparts. In fact, the smallest U.S. school—Hamilton at 397 students—is larger than all but one other school in the sample—the first English primary school at 465. In addition, two of the U.S. schools are working with students as old as 14 years, while students in all but one of the Australian and English schools top out at 11 years. Working with larger and older student bodies adds a level of complexity that our analysis was not equipped to parse out. But that said, even with these variations, we found certain marked consistencies in principal practices, policies, and traits across these diverse sites that map on well to the core practices for success identified by Leithwood and Riehl (2005).

In the next several paragraphs, we discuss each of Leithwood and Riehl’s (2005) core leadership practices that were evident in the successful principals of challenging schools across the USA, England, and Australia. We also highlight four leadership traits that the principals exhibited in their use of the core practices (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). The traits are: (1) empathy, (2) passion, (3) persistence, and (4) flexible thinking. Using samples of the narrative data, we will next try to illustrate how these principal’s used each core practice in his/her particular school and national context.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>School size</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Leadership team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Billabong</td>
<td>4–12 Govt. Primary School</td>
<td>Regional Low wealth</td>
<td>225 students, Anglo-Saxon, with approx 17% Indigenous Australian students. 17 teachers</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2 (Principal, one senior teacher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>5–11 Govt. Primary School</td>
<td>Inner suburban Low wealth</td>
<td>218 students, Mainly Anglo-Saxon. 20% of families have a background other than English. 15 teachers</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4 (Principal, assistant principal and two leading teachers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>5–11 Catholic Primary School</td>
<td>Outer suburban Low wealth</td>
<td>146 students, Anglo-Saxon. Only 2% from a language background other than English. 11 teachers</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5 (Principal, Deputy Principal, Religious Education Coordinator, Literacy Coordinator, Curriculum Coordinator)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School F</td>
<td>5–11 Catholic Primary School</td>
<td>Suburban Low wealth</td>
<td>388 students, 73% Italian, 8% Asian, 7% Arabic, 4% Anglo/Celt, 4% Greek, 3% European, 1% South American, 20 teachers</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8 (Principal, Deputy Principal, Coordinators of Religious Education, Learning and Teaching, Literacy, Mathematics, Information Technology)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Setting Directions

All the principals studied set remarkably similar directions for their schools early in their tenures, with each case in varying stages of development. Specifically, all 13 principals/headteachers expressed two simultaneous intentions: to secure the building and redefine the school focus on teaching and learning. Further, these principals protected students and faculty from unwanted intruders and disruptions, while at the
same time introducing an “open door” policy for parents and community members. Consider, the following comment from Fraser’s principal (USA):

I knew the first thing I had to do was clean the school up . . . literally, get the graffiti off the walls and clean the bathrooms, lock the doors so people couldn’t wander in and use the bathroom. So we locked all doors but one and got parents to help us secure that one. And it meant cleaning up the neighborhood around the school. Parents and the community and teachers needed to see the school as a safe place where children could and would learn.

Many Fraser parents told similar stories about how their charismatic principal transformed the school from a “dumping ground to a learning place”. Likewise, teachers talked at length about the principal’s efforts to clean up the school and neighborhood, attributing her actions to a “deep sense of caring and empathy for all children.” It is interesting to notice the similarities between the Hamilton (USA) principal’s narrative below and the Fraser quote cited earlier:

We started to clean up the school and bring order to chaos. I had all the doors locked except for one and got parents to help me secure that one during the day. At the same time, we worked on ways to redefine the way we viewed this school – that it was a place for teaching and learning. That was the whole purpose . . . and once teachers knew that I was not afraid of the kids, that I could control the types of behavior through dialogue and consequence, they became empowered, at least in the classroom, to feel that they had more control.

The Hamilton principal had been a guidance counselor at Fraser and witnessed the dramatic changes in that school first hand. One teacher’s comment was typical of many others when she stated, “[the Hamilton principal] was quiet, but had good people skills and she seemed to have a plan. So gradually people followed her lead.” Many teachers and parents also told us about how they admired the Hamilton principal’s quiet persistence, passion for children, and, as one teacher put it, “her quiet determination to teach the kids and us how to act to get the place under control and raise student achievement.” The Hamilton principal lacked experience, but she made up for it with, as her assistant principal told us, “her willingness to roll up her sleeves, bring order to chaos, and even teach the children herself if that’s what it took to change the school.” At the same time, many Hamilton interviewees acknowledged that their successes were nuanced with, as one teacher put it, “persistent pockets of poor classroom instruction.”

The principal at Costello (USA) also set a very clear direction from the minute she arrived, making it understood to all that safety and control were the school’s first orders of business, because for children living in poverty, she believed that “a safe, caring school environment is what is best for them.” Like the Hamilton and Fraser principals, the Costello principal’s passion for children was widely recognized, but the Costello principal quickly developed a reputation as a directive leader who, as one teacher put it, “appears to have more empathy for the neighborhood children than teachers who she thinks are not able to handle them.”
To the surprise of the U.S. research team, school safety was not just an urban issue. The principal at rural Crockett (USA) told us that his school’s parents fear child abductions (often from a divorced or separated parent who does not have custody) and terrorism threats post 9/11. During visits to rural Crockett, like those to urban Fraser, Hamilton, and Costello, the researchers were greeted at the front door and told politely, but assuredly, that, unless we were on official business, we could not come into the building. While the Crockett principal did not convey the passion of the urban principals as they dealt with social issues, many teachers, parents, and students told us that his “caring attitude made them feel important and safe.” For more detailed information on the U.S. cases, see Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki, and Giles (2005).

British and Australian principals also made safety and learning major priorities early in their tenures. Quoting an Australian principal (School C), “In the first couple of years I had to forget about curriculum. I mean literally I had to get kids sitting in classrooms. And that was an enormous task. That sounds really exaggerated but it wasn’t.” Like the Hamilton (USA) principal, the new female principal of Billabong (Australia) willingly assumed leadership of a school with high poverty and related social challenges, including bullying and gang fights on the school grounds. As she described it, “I would have to go out to stop gang fights on the playground with my staff looking out the window to see if I could handle it.” Yet, as time went on, many staff interviewees said that she had won them over, not just “because she could handle the challenges, but because she was willing to work hard and had such empathy for Billabong students and their families.” The Billabong principal’s empathy is apparent in her espoused beliefs about education, “Why should kids have to have such a rough trot simply because they’re on the wrong side of the tracks here or anywhere? Public education ought to always be about justice and giving kids a chance.” For additional information on the Australian cases, see Gurr, Drysdale, and Mulford (2005).

Similar sentiments were heard from English headteachers, such as this from one head describing her efforts at creating a safe learning environment,

The ward experiences a number of social problems (i.e., alcoholism, abuse, violence). There has been some bullying in the school as well...a problem that the headteacher and other staff members are monitoring while we’re monitoring tests and other inspected areas. But it’s not but a small part of the population really. You just have to realize where these kids are coming from and make them feel safe and part of the school.

Some teachers added that the principal “genuinely recognized and promoted the value of students from diverse social and religious backgrounds.” Other interviewees recognized the headteacher’s passion for making all children feel safe and successful. As one teacher put it, “She really has worked to make this a caring spot for kids so they can learn and get opportunities to make better lives for themselves.” For additional information on UK cases, see Day (2005).
Developing People

Beyond setting directions, successful leaders have the knowledge, dispositions, and skills to help people improve teaching and learning in their schools (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). Our findings also indicated that principals of challenging schools had to be extremely creative with personal and often scarce professional resources in order to help people grow as teachers and learners. The Hamilton principal (USA), for example, assumed a direct instructional leadership role by teaching an eighth-grade class (a tested grade in the USA). This is especially noteworthy in the U.S. context because, unlike English headteachers, American principals rarely do any classroom instruction. Yet, this principal worked very hard as a math teacher and, in the process, she modeled what it means to be a professional learner for her teachers. As one teacher described her efforts,

You can’t ask people to do things you’re not willing to do yourself. When there was no one to teach a struggling eighth grade class, she did it herself. And the students made gains that year. I think leading by example has made all the difference.

At the same time, the Hamilton principal openly acknowledged that her instructional background was limited and that she would need additional resources for professional development to make the necessary fundamental changes in classroom practices. She stated,

I started to look for professional development for teachers because the reality was that they were doing the best they could do, but it wasn’t really bringing about the results we needed. I knew I could only do so much by myself.

She sent key teachers to the Teachers College Literacy and math trainings at Fraser, and these teachers came back and shared what they learned with their peers. At that time, the Fraser principal and teachers were in the 5th year of Teachers College training, and the impact of that training on the classroom was evident in many teacher interviews and fieldnotes. The following quote by a Fraser teacher is typical of many others when she states,

Going to Teachers College for training and having their coaches come to my classroom changed my teaching completely. I now know how to help kids from the most deprived circumstances learn to read effectively and love it enough to do it for a lifetime.

These Fraser teachers were also willing to provide professional support for Hamilton teachers who were dealing with a similar population of students.

Like the Hamilton principal, the Costello principal (USA) acknowledged that she did not have the pedagogical knowledge base to help her staff until she found a packaged literacy program called America’s Choice. That program came with ongoing staff development that, in her words,

really helped teachers learn how to teach reading skills and raise their expectations for what children could learn in reading and writing, even in this school with all the problems and challenges and lack of academic capital kids bring to school when they start.
Many teachers told us that they resisted America’s Choice at first, but eventually came around to recognize, as one teacher put it, “the value of this sort of skills-based approach for our kids.”

The Billabong (Australia) principal also encountered resistance when she initiated authentic literacy and math processes that were more appropriate for the children in her school. She argued, “. . . our kids have low tolerance for didactic teaching . . . they have to have constructivist learning.” These changes involved a good deal of “unlearning”, followed by new learning, which made the principal unpopular with a number of her staff. The Australian principal faced resistance to her authentic literacy initiatives even though authentic literacy practices have been used in Australian classrooms and supported by national policies for several decades. On the other hand, the U.S. principals are accountable for policies that appear to support more traditional, skills-based instructional practices (as reflected in the America’s Choice program adopted by Costello).

Like the Australian principals, the English headteachers also noted the importance of developing teachers to use authentic learning processes. As one headteacher stated, “You have to make sure the kids get to do the real reading and writing, not just practice activities that are disconnected. These kids need to be kept actively involved, and then they can all learn.” While she arguably had greater authority over curriculum decisions than her U.S. peers, the English headteacher noted, “It’s important to talk these decisions through with the teachers or you really don’t get anywhere no matter how good your idea may be.” In sum, the principals’ narratives all indicate a commitment to help people, whether providing time to deal with family situations, rolling up their sleeves and doing the hard work alongside teachers, or simply showing empathy and respect to people whose backgrounds differed from their own. At the same time, these principals were successful because they either had the pedagogical knowledge and skills to develop their teachers or they sought externally developed programs that could do the same.

Redesigning the Organization

According to Leithwood and Riehl (2003), “Successful principals develop their schools as effective organizations that support and sustain performance of teachers as well as students.” (p. 20) After the principals reduced safety concerns in their schools, they worked to redesign their schools into effective places for teaching and learning. Fraser was the most fully developed learning organization of the U.S. schools, with an elaborate set of decision-making teams. The principal distributed key responsibilities through the use of five site-based management committees, all of which have parent representation: curriculum, discipline, parent involvement, morale, and beautification. Each committee sends a representative to the school’s site-based decision-making team. The U.S. principals at Costello and Hamilton both stated their intention to redesign their schools around learning teams; however, there was far less evidence of learning teams at these sites than at Fraser. As one Hamilton teacher described the situation, “We have grade level meetings for common planning,
but I wouldn’t say we have many opportunities for teacher leadership in the school.” This was in large measure due to the fact that these schools were not as far along in the process of securing the safety of their buildings and making enough gains in student achievement to avoid sanctions. The lack of teacher leadership in some of the U.S. schools may also be due to the fact that, unlike England and Australia, U.S. policies do not hold schools (and principals) accountable for the use of shared decision-making processes.

In England and Australia, accountability policies have been in place for at least a decade prior to the U.S. federal No Child Left Behind Act (2002), and these policies/reforms (i.e., ERA in England; local management in Australia) include decentralization reforms. For example, Billabong, like other schools in Australia, operates within a framework of local school management for learning. When local school management is working well, it provides a principal the opportunity for democratic curriculum development. As the School B principal explains:

We have a clear view of where curriculum should be, where learning needs to be for the kids. If its local school management is running well, it’s democratic, it’s open, people are about learning themselves, mistakes are tolerated, even if they’re costly sometimes you accept that . . . there’s a lot of synergy generated.

Two principals in England, who arguably have more autonomy than their U.S. and Australian counterparts, made similar comments:

Principal 1: We have autonomy to be democratic and make our own school decisions with our teachers.

Principal 2: We’re at a point now where we can really focus our decision-making on the teaching in classrooms.

Managing the Instructional Program

Effective principals in challenging schools across all three nations provided instructional support, monitored classroom activity, buffered staff from distractions to their work and, whenever possible, hired staff members whose personal priorities aligned with the school mission. For example, the Fraser principal (USA) supported the Teachers College Literacy Project with her visible presence in the hallways and classrooms. As one teacher noted,

She constantly reminds everyone that this school is a place for learning. There’s no time to waste on poor [student] behavior or poor teaching behavior. We need to work hard to implement the literacy training and improve reading and writing for all students.

On several occasions, the principal “persuaded” underperforming teachers to transfer to another school, taking full advantage of her opportunity to hire good teachers who would be committed to fulfilling the school mission.

Hamilton’s (USA) principal did not have as many resources to support literacy initiatives as Fraser’s principal, but she maintained a visible presence in classrooms;
making sure teachers and students knew they had to do their best. As one teacher reported, “If you’re the kind of teacher who’s just going to hang back, [the principal] makes sure you know this is not the place for you.” In the U.S. cases, rather than viewing this external pressure as an obstacle to improvement, these principals saw it as a way to focus teachers, parents, and students on the direction they were intending, that is, raising expectations for improved student achievement.

Similar perspectives on accountability pressures were noted in the British leaders. As one head put it,

We just have to go forward and do our best to shield the teaching from some of the needless pressure. We also believe children can learn quite a bit when you teach them well. The tests are testing that in a way.

These principals demonstrated an ability to not be confined by the challenging nature of contexts in which they work. They did not comply, subvert, or overtly oppose. Rather they actively mediated and moderated within a set of core values and practices that transcended narrowly conceived instructional improvement agendas (Day, 2005). The English headteachers’ efforts to buffer accountability pressures were recognized by teachers in their schools. One teacher’s comments were typical of many others when she said, “[The headteacher] has the sense to look at our kids and do what’s best rather than strictly listening to some of the laws that don’t seem to really know what kids need.” In many instances, as in the U.S. cases, the British principals needed to use their flexible thinking skills to think “outside the box” and mediate strict accountability and school improvement policies.

Principals in the Australian cases also saw themselves as educational leaders who acted as role models for research-based teaching and learning. For example, the principal of School A clearly and passionately articulated a range of teaching strategies that were accepted and adopted by his teachers. He described himself as the “curriculum leader”. In the words of one teacher leader,

He is aware of what is going on and speaks about curriculum with passion. His knowledge of curriculum and how education works has been a key to teachers taking on-board change so well. He has real credibility because he practices what he preaches.

And while the Australian literacy policies appear to be closely aligned with authentic pedagogy and related priorities of these schools, the Australian principals, like their U.S. and English counterparts, needed to be persistent and creative in their efforts to improve teaching and learning in their challenging schools.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

All the principals we studied were experiencing changing demographics, increased accountability, higher expectations for student performance, and organizational reforms (self-management at various levels of maturity); significant changes that have challenged their leadership practices. In spite of these challenges, we found all 13 principals to be exemplary leaders who have set and maintained a direction for their
schools and exerted a very strong, positive influence on people’s willingness to follow their lead. All exhibited the other core skills that Leithwood and Riehl (2005) contend are necessary for school success (i.e., developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program). These findings (conducted with similar data sources and methods) on successful principals in the USA, England, and Australia extend prior research conducted in single-nation contexts.

More specifically, each principal/headteacher initiated change in the physical environment, making the school building more attractive and safe by limiting access and screening visitors in order to reduce disruptions to instruction. At the same time, the principals fostered a school environment that was more open to parents and others who were entering the school with the best interests of children. The principals we studied also knew that, if people were expected to improve, they need opportunities to build the intellectual and experiential capacity necessary to succeed. To promote professional development and provide individual and collective support for staff, these principals displayed creative, flexible thinking, using whatever fiscal and/or material resources available. They modeled best instructional practices and, when possible, redesigned school structures, policies, and practices to facilitate collaboration and improve school performance.

Moreover, the evidence suggests that principals who made a difference in high-poverty schools exhibited similar traits of persistence, empathy, passion, and flexible, creative thinking. While all of the principals recognized and had empathy for the barriers to learning that poverty can produce, none allowed these conditions to be used as excuses for poor performance. Principals/headteachers of challenging schools we studied were passionate about making a difference in the lives of children. In most cases, they knowingly assumed a leadership of schools in high-crime, poverty-stricken areas with high needs and few resources. Flexible thinking and creativity were necessary for making a difference in high needs schools. Simply put, our cases clearly demonstrate that this job is not for the faint of heart. It takes courage and persistence, as well as leadership knowledge and skills, to be successful in high-poverty challenging schools.

With our focus on only 13 high-poverty elementary schools, we cannot say that the commonality of leadership practices in these cases can be generalized to other high-poverty elementary schools. School improvement initiatives in communities where safety and security have not been compromised probably would not require the same starting point. However, our evidence suggests that creating a safe, nurturing, child-centered environment may be a necessary first step in schools confronting the conditions found at our sites.

While commonalities across cases were apparent, so too were some differences. Schools differed both within and across countries in size, diversity, stage of development, leadership structure (i.e., top down or team centered), school-wide pedagogy, and resource need. Marked differences in enrollment and demographic diversity may be important to principal effectiveness because such differences can affect the complexity leaders confront. For example, Tables 1–3 reveal that enrollments in U.S. schools tend to be larger than those in Australia or England,
with Costello, at 800+ students, far and away the largest—almost twice the size of any other school studied. It also had a more diverse student body (56% African American, 30% Caucasian, 6% Asian American, 5% Hispanic, and 3% Native American) than the other, more homogeneous U.S. schools. (It was harder to determine diversity, especially in the British cases.)

Differences in school size and cultural diversity may impede a principal’s ability to redesign the organization and/or communicate with the community. All things being equal, the larger a faculty, the less opportunity for individual contacts a principal can have. Similarly, a larger parent community reduces a principal’s opportunity for as many one-on-one meetings with parents. And, given the greater racial and ethnic diversity in some communities, the potential for miscommunications due to differences in cultural cues are likely to increase.

A growing body of research indicates that children, especially those struggling academically, benefit from smaller schools due to the increased likelihood of having a close, personal relationship with at least one adult (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). We suggest that the same benefits can accrue to a smaller faculty and school community, especially in terms of increasing the likelihood of developing a closer, personal relationship with the school leader. Leithwood et al. (2004) contend that the optimum elementary school size is 250–300 students, which was more typical of schools in Australia and England, than in the USA. In Fraser and Costello, enrollments are respectively double and triple the optimal figure, thus we might assume that organizational complexity increased accordingly. Although size was not a focus of this study, we believe it had an impact on principal effectiveness and, as such, should be examined in greater detail in future research.

**Recommendations for Leadership Preparation and Practice in High-Poverty Schools**

Although we have an understanding of the core practices and traits principals need to lead school improvement initiatives, we know less about how individuals acquire these skills and traits, that is, through courses of study, practical experiences, or some combination of the two. We recommend that preparation programs give particular consideration to high-poverty schools, both urban and rural. Aspiring leaders need to understand the extent to which these essential skills are mediated by context, especially in schools confronting the greatest challenges. It is recommended that programs preparing principals require internship placements, whenever possible, in high-poverty schools for at least part of a clinical experience.

Creating high-quality clinical placements in challenging schools should not be reserved only for aspiring administrators. Mentoring programs should be developed for current principals to observe firsthand the practice of exemplary practicing school leaders, such as those in this study, or by giving exemplary leaders the chance to visit and consult in challenging contexts (this second option might attract recently retired successful school leaders).
Recommendations for Future Research

Research into successful leadership in high-poverty schools needs to be expanded into more and different national contexts and locales varying in size and student demographics. Moreover, this research needs a longitudinal component to better understand how school improvement and the leadership practices that support it evolve over time, especially the skills needed to sustain improvement after a successful leader leaves a challenging school setting. To date, our research indicates that, while differences exist between and amongst challenging, high-poverty school in Australia, the UK, and the USA, there are also marked similarities in leadership practice that may hold important clues to improving the life chances of children being educated in these settings. Now more than ever, all children need and deserve principals with the commitment, passion, and leadership skills to make a difference.

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