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Leadership in international schools

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Abstract

This blog reflects ongoing research on learning-centred leadership in international schools. The study focuses on the practice of principals, leadership development, and the social impact of leadership. The blog aims to create dialogue and encourage the feedback of academics, professionals, and readers. This will ultimately enrich my research and help to constantly (re)shape my social construction of knowledge on leadership and schools.

International schools

International schools are diverse institutions that vary extensively but remain linked through their many commonalities. They have been understudied in academic research, probably, due to their for-profit and corporatised nature. This might be the reason behind the scarcity of studies in the context of their leadership. However, if we do not understand the nature of these schools, it might not be possible to fully comprehend the mechanisms through which principals work and lead. The lens through which these schools are viewed could be critical in shaping the way we understand leadership. Are international schools only viewed as high-end schools hosting a diverse community and offering international mindedness and global citizenship values? And why are studies on leadership in international schools limited and restricted to the managerial and communicational aspects of the job?

International schools provide 'elitist' academic programs and an internationalised or a foreign curriculum to expatriates and the local communities (Bunnel, 2010). They are powerful structures that are either independently governed or members of a chain of schools engaging with wider partnerships locally and globally. They have grown massively over the last 30 years, benefiting from a climate of modernisation and neoliberalisation in different countries (McTaggart, 2018). They are a part of an economised system that offers a wide range of services and prepares its students to be the future workforce (Kim, 2019). While they have been described as elitist, their communities are extremely diverse and could include vulnerable groups such as migrants who are constantly worried about relocation and relationships, struggle with

visas, immigration, and stable income or those who cannot return to their home countries. There is no doubt that these schools are socially and culturally stratified. Thousands of families in different countries, especially in the Global South, have little choices other than investing in their children's education due to the lack of socio-economic security in their countries. They choose schools that would equip their children with English language skills, an internationally recognised diploma and a higher social capital.

How does this context affect leadership?

Understanding the nature and structure of international schools and the complexity of their communities helps us to re-conceptualise what we know as leadership in these specific contexts. We often do not know much beyond published bright stories that extol the joy and excitement of working abroad in Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East. But this is my version of the story:

The importance of the principal role in supporting school improvement and improving teaching and learning has been confirmed by different scholars (Leithwood et al, 2019; Hue & Hallinger, 2018). The conceptualisation of the responsibility of the school principal has been associated with a strong focus on leadership for learning (Slaavik, 2020). However, a principal in the contemporary international schools' discourse is a powerful super communicator who attracts greater enrolment rates, builds partnerships with the community and with local and global stakeholders and ensures the school goes from great to greater. This shiny profile published in a neat prospectus or on well-crafted websites does not tell the whole story. The realist narrative is that leading an international school is a more complicated role than it may seem. While these schools call for international mindedness and global citizenship and preach for values of democracy, most of them are privately or corporately owned and parts of a global chain. Their market agendas might instigate a challenge to leadership that adds up to other challenging areas. School leaders are not trained to negotiate business goals or to strategise and navigate market channels (Courtney, 2015). However, many of them have embraced the corporate language that is compliant with market efficiency and 'maximisation' (Gunter, 2011). While the problem is not in profit and market efficiency per se, it could raise a question on the conflict of interest when leaders choose to consistently support teachers and students while ensuring corporate interests are

intact. This corporate culture could be problematic when teaching becomes a service and learning a commodity.

Again, international schools are not one prototype of schools, but it is important for the study of leadership to acknowledge that maintaining the focus on teaching and learning, supporting teachers and students socially and emotionally while providing sources of professional development and guidance is not simply routine work. In schools where teachers, staff and students come from different backgrounds and different language proficiencies, inclusivity and providing equitable opportunities could be difficult to achieve. This is particularly difficult in environments where socio-economic and cultural divisions are evident and where all forms of privilege present themselves as welcome and well-celebrated. In similar contexts, responding to institutional structure(s), market agendas and the social infrastructure of the school while maintaining the focus on teaching and learning requires not only leadership but advocacy and heroism.

Thus, researching educational leadership in international schools is not only important but most needed not only to theorise leadership but to create a new contemporary conceptualisation of the word. In this sense, I would argue that viewing and studying leadership neutrally is not sufficient. Leadership in schools is about 'action and 'relationship' (Eacott, 2013b); it can never be understood without addressing its relationship with the 'field' and the powerful structures whether corporate, social or political. Power structures not only influence the field but could shape leadership practice and shape the way they respond and interact with the social mechanisms of the school. Again, this discussion is not beyond the study of leading teaching and learning but mostly at the heart of it.

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