
Special issue: *International perspectives on signature pedagogies for school leaders*

Editorial

International perspectives on signature pedagogies for school leaders: synthesis and discussion

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Introduction

This special issue addresses how educational leaders internationally develop their practices and how this is shaped by diverse models of system governance, high- and low-autonomy school systems, accountability regimes and cultural differences. This special issue call was timely, as 2025 has seen key global studies gathering data on the status quo of the profession, trends and significant challenges, such as the UNESCO report on teacher shortages, that are crucial in understanding how schools are steered and supported globally. Over recent decades new forms of accountability have pressurised teachers and leaders and have eroded the profession. This coincides with a doubled global rate of teachers leaving and growing social inequalities. Hence, the report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasises the need to balance external control with formative and supportive approaches. Professional growth opportunities, enhanced well-being and support for teachers, and fostering inclusive environments are among the key solutions stressed by the report (UNESCO, 2024). Against this background, the special issue is framed by Lee Shulman's (2005) seminal work on signature pedagogies, that is:

Types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions. In these signature pedagogies, the novices are instructed in critical aspects of the three fundamental dimensions of professional work – to think, to perform, and to act with integrity. (p. 52)

In comparison with law and medicine, where case studies and rounds (in which doctors and their teams visit patients to discuss and review their cases) are used respectively to generate new knowledge and share understandings of practice, it is argued that educational professionals do not have an equivalent. Education might be lacking a 'signature pedagogy'.

Signature pedagogies have a *surface structure* of processes for teaching and learning about the profession; a *deep structure* that involves assumptions about the best ways to impart knowledge and the most appropriate forms of knowledge; and an *implicit structure*, comprising the beliefs, values and moral underpinnings of practice. This can be understood as the hand, head and heart of school leadership development.

Shulman (2005) suggests that just as studying a nation's nurseries tells us much about its culture, studying the 'nurseries' of professions would be revealing of the ways in which practitioners develop. Thus, the analysis of signature pedagogies serves a teleological aim: to reveal the nature of the profession itself – in this case, what kind of school leaders are being created through these pedagogies, and for what educational purpose?

Problem statement and research questions

While there has been some research on signature pedagogies for teachers (for example, Mansilla and Chua, 2017; Yendol-Hoppey and Franco, 2014), only a few studies have looked at school leadership development using this framework (for example, Black and Murtadha, 2007; Meyer and Shannon, 2010; Sappington et al., 2010). This special issue brings together learning from international sources to shed further light on leadership preparation and its knowledge base, values and practices. The aim is to advance thinking about school leadership development through the application of signature pedagogies and conversely, through this analysis, to extend the understanding and currency of Shulman's concept.

The questions posed in this synthesis are:

1. In what ways has Shulman's concept of signature pedagogies been applied in the analysis of leadership development?
2. What does this analysis reveal about school leadership development in these countries?
3. What are the advantages and limitations of the signature pedagogies approach to school leadership development?

Methodology

Our special issue synthesises five papers from seven national jurisdictions: Türkiye, Singapore, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, England and Scotland. Each of these articles adopts Shulman's signature pedagogies concept to look at leadership development in these countries. These articles include analysis of national systems for the development of school principals; master's programmes in school leadership; a middle leadership programme; and the development of mentors in schools as part of a national programme for early career teachers. In two cases, the authors explicitly compare national systems of leadership development (Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar on the one hand; England and Scotland on the other). The analysis in these articles is at the individual school leaders level, programme level and policy level.

Through our synthesis, we also look at what can be understood about leadership development from this perspective, that is, the 'pedagogies' of school leadership. A further analysis looks at the ways in which the signature pedagogy concept can be understood theoretically and analytically. Finally, we suggest some uses and potential expansions of the signature pedagogies approach in the context of school leadership.

Findings

We organise the findings in relation to the three research questions posed above.

In what ways has Shulman's concept of signature pedagogies been applied in the analysis of leadership development?

Looking at the ways in which Shulman's concept has been applied, adapted and extended, we see six overall uses. These range from looking at ideal or typical forms of leadership development in a jurisdiction, to a more analytical use to diagnose or illuminate features of these systems, their strengths and weaknesses. We organise these findings in terms of understanding forms of leadership development first, followed by how signature pedagogies are used for the analysis of leadership development.

The five articles and how they express these categories are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. How the concept of signature pedagogies was applied to leadership development in each article

Paper	Countries	Ideal	Pervasiveness	Archetypal	Hand, Head, Heart	Diagnostic	Supplemented
Al Haj Sleiman et al. (2025)	Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait		x	x	x	x	
Eleftheriadou et al. (2025)	England	x		x	x	x	x
Greany et al. (2025)	England and Scotland		x	x	x	x	x
Özkan and Arslan (2025)	Türkiye			x	x	x	
Teo (2025)	Singapore			x	x	x	x

Notes: Light grey = Forms of leadership development; Dark grey = The analysis of leadership development.

Forms of leadership development

The articles included in this special issue illustrate various forms of leadership development as either 'ideal' methods for developing leaders, 'pervasive' (or not) methods for leadership development or 'archetypal' examples of developing school leaders in a region.

(i) As an 'ideal' form of leadership development

The research by Eleftheriadou et al. (2025) in England describes some of the advantages for school leaders of promoting mentors and mentoring in schools. Pointing to previous literature on mentor development, they suggest that promoting effective mentoring involves a collaborative approach to developing capacity and sharing responsibility for school improvement, the encouragement of experiential learning, improving emotional intelligence and building trust, improving communication skills, enhancing professional identity, increasing willingness to commit to teaching and creating a supportive mentoring culture. Such a 'signature' approach is thus both a means and an end, since so many of these features contribute to the school's improvement trajectory. They point out in their analysis of mentor development in the English Early Career Framework that developing mentors creates the conditions that shape professional learning to improve the organisational learning capacities of the school. Participating school leaders who valued mentor development did so as an investment in people, to create a culture of respect and care, and to set expectations and model professional practice. Mentor development was also seen by many school leaders as a pathway to further leadership development. As such, the authors make the case for school leaders to use mentor development as a 'signature' or 'ideal' pedagogy.

(ii) A form of leadership development that is pervasive and/or intuitive across jurisdictions

Shulman describes how the legal profession uses case analysis to develop the expertise needed to become an accomplished lawyer, pointing out that this is a widespread and implicitly understood form of learning for lawyers. As Greany et al. (2025) point out, Shulman uses the example of the practicum in initial teacher education as a potential signature pedagogy for becoming a teacher while criticising its lack of consistent implementation.

Analysing a subset of their comparative leadership development research in England and Scotland, Greany et al. (2025) compare the experiences of national development programmes for school leaders (headteachers). Geographically proximal but very different in scale, both UK jurisdictions have similar sets of standards for school leaders that underpin their leadership development systems. However, their approaches to developing school leaders in their national programmes are dissimilar. To begin with, the intention of the programme in England was policy implementation: it was technical and domain specific; while in Scotland, the idea was to encourage reflection, self-awareness and a more agentic approach to policy enactment. In England the approach was underpinned by school effectiveness evidence about the role of a headteacher in an effective school. In Scotland it focused on professional reflection and developing a unique approach to becoming a school leader. Thus, Scotland's programme for leadership development was more varied while England's was more prescriptive. While Scotland's approach was seen by the authors as a 'people first' model, the English programme was described as a 'knowledge first' model.

The authors of this comparative research thus reject the idea of a pervasive pedagogy for school leadership, noting these important differences even across this proximal culture and geography. These pedagogies are not intuitive either; rather, individuals in both contexts devised their own unique ways of preparing for school leadership, for instance by taking on leadership in other contexts to gain experience. In fact, common to both was the perception that these leadership programmes did not play a significant role in preparing people for school leadership (at least not alone) due to the growing complexities faced by the profession.

(iii) Archetypal leadership development

We sometimes refer to a 'chef's signature dish' or 'signature style of cooking'. Using this analogy, we can identify the distinctive features of leadership development in a region. Unlike the previous point (i), this is less about what is ideal or desired, and more about recognising patterns and characteristics that define this jurisdiction. In the previous point (ii), Greany et al. (2025) showed how the underlying values of 'what works' research in England was distinctive to England. Here, the idea was to have a so-called golden thread running through the profession, including consistent messages about what effective school leaders should do that cohere with the messages teachers receive early in their careers. This can be considered archetypal of the English system. A further example is given by Al Haj Sleiman et al. (2025) in their comparison of Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar. While noting differences in how leaders are developed, they also show how all three systems reveal practices and values, both on the surface and at deep levels, based on Islamic teachings and cultures. Their research reveals broader patterns that, in this case, cross national boundaries.

The analysis of leadership development

Shulman's signature pedagogy is used as a conceptual lens for understanding studies of leadership development internationally in all five articles. The surface, deep and implicit levels are a useful way of focusing particularly on the potentially neglected values dimension behind programmes for developing school leaders. This concept could also be seen as a form of diagnosis of the needs of a programme or system in its leadership development, and finally as a tool to be used alongside other theories, rather than an all-encompassing framework.

(i) The hand, head and heart of leadership development

The signature pedagogies concept has been used to analyse leadership development in a holistic manner through its appeal to the 'hand, head and heart'. The surface structure looks at activities used in leadership development and how candidates are assessed; the deep level looks at assumptions about

the types of knowledge valued in leadership development and the relationship of the person to this knowledge; and the implicit structure makes visible the implicit or explicit values of the leadership programme. In Al Haj Sleiman et al.'s (2025) article, they compare national systems of leadership development in Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar. All three are Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in which, to varying degrees, national efforts and resources have been put into developing school leaders. Notably, in Bahrain, since 2008 the Bahrain Teachers College (BTC) has had its Educational Leadership Programme (ELP), which prepares potential assistant principals and principals, nominated by the Ministry for Education, for leadership roles in schools. As with its GCC counterparts Qatar and Kuwait, Bahrain has participated in many international collaborations to develop its leadership capacities. For example, the ELP in Bahrain was originally developed in conjunction with the National Institute for Education in Singapore. The authors also note the borrowing of policy standards in Qatar from Australia, Britain and New Zealand, for instance. These initiatives suggest that these countries want to catch up with what they perceive as more successful or advanced counterparts in terms of school leadership development.

The authors note many differences between the three countries at the surface level, with greater autonomy given to BTC in Bahrain to implement government policies in leadership development than in the other two countries. Leadership courses are seen as more interactive in Bahrain, focusing on real-life scenarios and with exercises focused on applying theory to specific scenarios. Kuwait is seen to focus more on developing quality teaching through textbooks in its courses, and Qatar has a lecture-based approach, sometimes with seminars but with less focus on the practicalities of the job of a school leader.

Al Haj Sleiman et al. (2025) find the implicit level to be particularly revealing in their analysis, in which, as stated previously, the moral dimension relates largely to Islamic and family values rather than the values dimension of education itself or of leadership in education. They suggest there is a greater need to integrate the hand, head and heart elements and to contextualise professional development overall. The over-reliance on overseas policy borrowing and the paucity of local research to inform practice is seen as a weakness in all three countries. All three countries have also seen an expansion of peer dialogic exchanges among school leaders to make collaboration more consistent and to connect these with student needs. This adds to the structured programmatic elements, reminding us that leadership development occurs in many ways, often instigated by school leaders or prospective school leaders themselves.

(ii) A diagnostic tool

As with the previous holistic analysis of leadership development, the signature pedagogies concept has been utilised in a diagnostic manner to focus attention on where leadership development should be strengthened. This is the case in Özkan and Arslan's (2025) analysis of graduate leadership programmes in Türkiye.

For context, in Türkiye, principals do not have a special designation, rather they are teachers with administrative responsibilities. The researchers in this article looked at non-thesis educational administration master's programmes (NTEA-M), on which around 6,000 placements are taken up per year in a country of 107,000 school leaders. The research involved 12 interviews with academics who had taught the NTEA-M programme for at least five semesters. The researchers asked about the approaches academics prioritise when training future educational leaders (hand); how these academics convey the knowledge, skills and approaches to their students (head); and what ethical values they seek to instil in their students (heart). The authors identified eight areas of knowledge described by the academics, nine skills and three approaches. Knowledge included scientific or research knowledge alongside policy, cultural, organisational and motivational knowledge domains. Skills of communication, teamwork, problem-solving, motivation, leading change and decision-making were named. Finally, the approaches proposed by the academics teaching on these programmes for future school leaders included openness to change, emotional literacy, ethics and building social networks. In terms of approaches used to teach these NTEA-M programmes, lectures, applied and interactive methods, including problem-solving and simulations, were named, as well as critical thinking and discussion. Overall, a blend of approaches was favoured.

Five main ethical themes emerged from their analysis: honesty and transparency, responsibility, justice and equality, empathy and respect, and scientific integrity and critical thinking (Özkan and Arslan, 2025). In terms of responsibility, this was explained as the need to be accountable and to think about society, not just as an individual. As a 'diagnosis' of leadership development in Türkiye, Özkan and

Arslan (2025) concluded that more needs to be done to link theory to practice, with these programmes over-emphasising the former. They suggest that more is needed to 'create actionable insights' for future school leaders (Özkan and Arslan, 2025, p. 15). The emphasis on the scientific and research base in the training was described by the academics as reflecting a concern about low professionalism in terms of standards for school leaders in Türkiye overall. These academics also stressed their desire to make school leaders agents of positive societal change, and that it is very important to consider and discuss ethical values in real-world scenarios. Thus the 'diagnostic' element of this analysis not only shines a light on the NTEA-M programmes but also further reflects on the state of the profession.

(iii) Supplementing Shulman's signature pedagogy concept with other theories

While recognising the value of Shulman's signature pedagogy as a holistic concept to make sense of leadership development, others view it as a tool to be supplemented with other theories. For instance, in Greany et al.'s (2025) analysis, they contrast the Scottish and English national systems of leadership training as people-first vs knowledge-first approaches. In doing so, they draw on the work of Brooks et al. (2023), where the apprentice type of knowledge model is used in some teacher education programmes, while others take a community of practice approach. Similarly, in the context of educational leadership development in Singapore, Teo (2025) sees the need to, as she puts it, 'repair' the signature pedagogies approach in relation to school leadership, adding a focus on three elements: (a) the environment, (b) cultural values and (c) curriculum.

In doing so, Teo draws on work by Joseph Schwab (for example, Schwab, 1971), an early mentor of Shulman, and Alexander's (2008) work on pedagogy, both of whom advocate for the important role played by the "milieu" in which pedagogy occurs. She also applies Whitson's (2008) definition of curriculum 'as the course of human experience in which the formation of human being/s, institutions, cultures and societies take place' (Teo, 2025, p. 4). In taking this approach, Teo uses an enhanced consideration of educational leadership that considers what 'real' educational aims are being served compared with 'instrumental' concerns, such as narrower effectiveness or efficiency aims that are driven by external sources. Drawing on cultural and institutional analysis of leadership development in Singapore, she thus brings attention to a 'primordial' value in Singaporean society, that is, that education is steeped in a culture of collectivism and community above individualism. She also describes the consensus that education is designed to mould the future generation; as such, having qualified people to meet the demands of the workforce and to fit into society surpasses the educational aim of realising people's unique pathways to growth. This leads her to consider present concerns in Singaporean educational thinking about the need to promote individual flourishing in schools. She notes how this is mirrored in aspects of middle leadership development, where candidates can experience greater agency and choice over aspects of their own learning journey through dialogue and discussion than was previously the case.

What this analysis reveals about leadership development in these seven countries

The scales of analysis of signature pedagogies in these articles range from the level of national or regional systems and policies, to specific programmes, to the signature pedagogy used by individual senior leaders in developing other leaders. Overall, the articles' analyses of school leadership development through Shulman's signature pedagogy lens reveal several noteworthy features of leadership development internationally.

In terms of there being one suggested signature pedagogy to establish internationally, the case so far is weak, partly due to differences in culture, policies and systems of governance as well as the maturity of leadership development. This makes it hard to advocate for one pervasive system for developing leaders. In the context of England, a strong argument for developing mentors was made, given the multiple other benefits of doing so to the professional culture of the schools where this was effective, and the potential for school improvement through this approach. Whether this approach 'travels well' may depend partly on the governance features of the education system, including the degree of autonomy afforded to schools and school leaders.

Looking across international borders, it becomes clear that many countries have underdeveloped, non-systematic school leadership development approaches, and that this remains an area in need of

improvement. Paradoxically, participants in the more structured leadership programmes of England and Scotland do not value them as preparation for school leadership, at least not in their own right. This is not to say they have no use, but it would be a mistake to consider one signature national programme to be adequate preparation for the complex demands of leading a school.

Complexity in leadership development emerges as a key theme in all the studies. For example, they all consider that culture plays a part in the implicit or explicit values that underpin leadership development. Further, both Teo's and Greany et al.'s studies point out that the challenges of becoming a school leader are quite different to those of becoming a teacher, and this centres on the need to transform one's professional identity from that of a teacher to that of a leader, surfacing and understanding one's own values in context. This suggests a role for a variety of approaches to leadership development that include context-based and scenario-based approaches that enable the discussion of decision-making, problem-solving and ethical resolutions.

The advantages and limitations of the signature pedagogies approach to school leadership development

So far, we have explored the ways in which the signature pedagogies concept has been applied, and its implications for school leadership development internationally, albeit based on a small sample. However, it is important to consider the limitations of adopting this approach to school leadership development. First, we consider whether the model itself is fundamentally inapplicable to leadership development, and second, we look at ways in which the model lacks 'coverage' of this field.

One argument that could be levelled towards the signature pedagogies concept is that Shulman's intent was to look at early-stage development in a career – the 'nurseries' point. So, we can see how this may apply to initial teacher education – but to what extent does this apply to leadership development, which occurs at a later career stage? In relation to this point, many of the articles highlight the fundamental reorientation from being a teacher to becoming a leader. The need to prepare leaders ethically speaks to this point; the implication is that values, from a transformational leadership point of view, are communicated via the school leader, and that principals will come across many situations in which they will need to draw on these principles in ways that teachers may not have to. This can be interpreted as school leadership itself being a new career for a teacher, and thus the 'nursery' argument would apply, or it could simply be about surfacing teachers' existing values but now from a leadership perspective. Given that most if not all school systems rely on teachers to go on to become leaders, rather than it being a separate career entirely, the late stage of career development argument may hold more strongly. However, the need to create a new 'identity' as a school leader to some degree speaks more to the nurseries point. In any case, the 'nursery' analogy could be taken too far; for example, doctors conduct rounds late into their careers, and lawyers still analyse and learn from cases throughout theirs.

Notwithstanding the debate discussed previously, there is a clear sense of the need to be prepared for the task of school leadership, whether this is as a new profession or the continuation of one. This has been shown to be a complex task with its own unique features, and thus many of the authors have drawn on other theories and concepts to more fully explain school leadership development. These points have been raised earlier, such as the need to look at culture, to consider curriculum and to consider identity change. The strong implication of these studies is that leadership development should not be understood through singular programmes, even when these are multifaceted, organised and coordinated programmes with optional elements. This may not be a bad thing, since this leaves a degree of agency to prospective leaders to carve out the experiences with which they choose to equip themselves for the challenge of leading schools. Clearly, the context of each country – and this will include governance models, levels of autonomy, funding and resources as well as history, sociology and culture – all need to be considered. Further research may also focus on how the surface, deep and implicit levels of leadership preparation interact with each other to explain future practice.

Despite limitations, the adoption of an approach that looks at practices, the knowledge base and the ethical aspects of leadership practice has clear advantages. A strength of these studies is that each author writes about their own context. In reviewing the hand, head and heart of school leadership development, the practices and knowledge are perhaps evident to outsiders, but ethical aspects may require an insider's perspective.

In adopting a signature pedagogies analysis, we are challenged to consider the state of school leadership and, by implication, the state of education itself. A way forward for research is to use this

exploration of school leadership, supplemented by leadership- and education-specific theories, to shed light on the role of school leaders in improving the quality of schooling worldwide.

Overall, Shulman's signature pedagogies offer a useful conceptual lens for expanding the analysis of educational leadership development programmes to not pay attention only to the head and the hand, but to put the heart at the centre. This invisible and potentially neglected dimension behind programmes for developing school leaders encompasses the implicit structure of the profession – the ethical, moral and value-driven dimensions – that is desperately needed in the current climate.

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