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*Exploring International Collaborations in Research,
Preparation, and Practice*

by

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Introduction

This paper is a collection of my thoughts in regard to the notion of international research in educational leadership. I have conducted and been involved in a number of research projects since beginning full-time employment in higher education that have allowed me to generate some perspectives on educational leadership in other cultures and social systems. I have also run masters programmes in two different universities that had an international focus as one of the principal aims. Finally I have studied a range of literature relating to cultural differences between nation states and engaged in discourse with many scholars from across the world. As a consequence I consider I may be able to offer opinion on the options for research in the future.

Previous Research

Most of the research in which I have been involved has been in collaboration with colleagues from other countries, where each participant has conducted a similar line of enquiry within their own country. Daresh & Male (2000) featured parallel investigations in the USA and UK, for example, whilst the International Beginning Principals Study in 2001 (see Barnett, 2001 & Male, 2001) involved other colleagues from Australia, Canada, Belgium and the Netherlands as well as three contributors from the US. Similarly I was involved in the seven country study of cultural differences led by Paula Cordeiro, University of San Diego that was based on the questionnaire developed by Hofstede (1980), which allowed to make some comment on the impact of national culture on leadership styles in English schools (Male, 1998).

This pattern of activity appears typical in that most international research seems to be based on the principle of investigating and reporting on your own country. To test that tentative conclusion I reviewed the 24 articles that had appeared last year in the journal *International Studies in Educational Administration* which is published by the

Commonwealth Council for Education Administration and Management (CCEAM). Only three of these articles featured studies that involved more than one country, meaning that the vast majority were authored by natives of the country featured. In other words, we are not getting any view of how the evidence accumulated for these studies is of significance to us in terms of our subsequent behaviour.

Where are the insights?

That illustrates the essential point I wish to make in this paper: that we may not be learning enough from each other by confining ourselves to presenting accounts of systems rather than seeking insights which might lead us to evaluate and change our leadership behaviours. To illustrate this point it is plain that I have developed my understanding of leadership as a male member of an ethnic group that has enjoyed dominance in my country for most of its recorded history. Furthermore, most of the literature and theory base that has informed my understanding has emerged from similar social settings and tends to reflect particular values from Western or Anglophone countries. I have reached the point, however, where I probably need to expand my range of leadership knowledge through insights into behaviour in different cultures and countries.

To be fair, however, I have not been idle in that regard. I have conducted research in countries other than my own (see, for example, Male & Merchant, 2000) and have engaged in discourse with students, academic colleagues and practitioners from across the world. My experience as director of masters degrees and principal development programmes have allowed me to build knowledge (and some understanding) of other school systems and leadership behaviours in other countries, largely through requiring participants to undertake a study visit as part of their required learning outcomes. I have also studied the works of those who attempt to describe the characteristics of cultures other than their own, both on a social anthropological basis and within education. Key in such works are the publications of the Dutch anthropologist Geert Hofstede (1980 & 1994) who undertook a survey of over 80,000 employees of IBM in the late 1970s, ultimately collecting 116,000 completed questionnaires. His analysis provides an extremely valuable tool for evaluating the impact of culture on behaviour. Other notable contributors to this field include Trompennars & Hampden-Turner (1997) and Durcan (1994), whilst within education we have seen useful contributions

form Wong & Evers (2001) and Cairns, Lawton & Gardner (2001). Despite this pattern of personal behaviour, however, I still feel woefully bereft of insights into other possible behaviour patterns derived from studies of alternate cultural settings. Those few insights I have gained have led me to believe I can learn much more if future research was geared to attaining a level of understanding akin to that claimed by ethnographers. Two examples of my learning in that regard are described below.

Examples of insights

The first is the story of the American company trying to win a contract with a South American customer against competition from a Swedish company which had an inferior and higher priced product (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997: 9 & 87-88). The American company made a slick, well-thought out presentation which it thought clearly demonstrated a superior product and lower price. The Swedes had invested a whole week in the selling trip and spent most of that time sharing the life spaces of their hosts, talking about common interests. Only **after** a 'private space' relationship had been established were the Argentineans willing to talk business. In contrast, the Americans invested only two days in the trip, knowing they had a superior product and presentation, and were turned down. The American team found themselves continually interrupted by 'personal' questions and 'social distractions' and when the corporate jet arrived on schedule to take them home, they had not adequately covered the business agenda. The Argentineans, to the Americans, seemed unable or unwilling to stick to the point. The Argentineans, for their part, found the Americans too direct, impersonal and pushy. They were surprised by the Americans' apparent belief that you could use logic to force someone to agree with you.

The second example is the time when I had the good fortune to be taken to the Superintendent's office in the Santa Fe Indian School District, a school system that catered for the local indigenous peoples and one that had spent several years in a close working relationship with a famous university based in the mid-west. I was shown to the office of Joe, the superintendent, and spent several hours in a fascinating and insightful conversation with him. The district, in transpired, was in receipt of substantial sponsorship from an established computer company who had installed state of the art hardware and software into the school district to support the student

learning environment. This system, explained Joe, was linked to a geopolitical satellite that allowed the students to locate any area on the ground and to zoom in for a close up view; furthermore, the system had sophisticated software that could locate sources of water and other minerals in that area. Suitably impressed, I expressed by excitement at a system so technologically advanced that it could conduct geographical surveys without ever having to traverse the ground. At that point Joe changed my life forever with his own assessment of the capability of the new computer system. “My ancestors could do that” he said. I paused for a moment before asking “do you mean they had the eye of the eagle”? His affirmative response indicated he believed that the capability of predicting the source of water was an art form that was a native part of life long before satellite technology would be considered as the fount of wisdom. Warming to his theme (that nature was being usurped by technology) he imparted another telling fact. To his knowledge human’s peripheral vision had decreased significantly in the space of a century as there was no longer a need to be so aware of and responsive to potential threat from predators or enemies. Did either of these issues represent evidence of human progress, he asked?

It was a watershed moment in my thinking. In making technological breakthroughs we may actually have reversed human advancement. Wow, that was hard to conceptualise and even more difficult to transfer my learning to future teaching! He was right, of course, and this is a message we must return to time again as we seek to establish learning environments for those students in our care. All parts of this story gave me fresh insights into a way of thinking about the world and my principal task now is to make effective use of them as I attempt to lead the learning of future school leaders.

Seeking other insights

But where are other such insights to be found? Hofstede’s work, brilliant as it was, is dated and despite re-working of the data in more recent times (Hofstede, 2001) it is no longer so relevant. Furthermore when the survey was conducted IBM did not have offices in China or sub-Saharan Africa, so these cultural influences are not a part of the categorisation framework that emerged from his research. The aim of the CCEAM journal is laudable in that aims to “connect the international community of scholars, practitioners and policy makers [...] to enhance the effectiveness of

educational leadership, management and administration” (Lumby & Foskett, 2007: 1) and yet from the evidence of last year’s volume we have few opportunities to achieve insights provided by examination of cultural influences and to subsequently apply them elsewhere. One exception to this phenomenon, however, is an article about the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as they seek to establish educational leadership preparation programmes that are indigenized (McPherson, Kachelhoffer & El Nemr, 2007). In examining the relevance of the ISLLC standards, for example, to their needs they conclude:

A [...] criticism is the degree of American ethnocentrism embedded in the standards. If the standards were adopted uncritically in the UAE, they could well be seen as promoting an offensively nationalist, pluralist, secular and culturally transformative view of schooling, run well ahead of national reforms, and ill prepare people for the leadership of Islamic or private schools. [Furthermore] in countries without the checks and balances of ‘good government’, a competency-based approach imposed nationally could create a class of leaders potentially able to capture the terms of their service, a danger not unknown in the Middle East.

It is work of this type that I would like to see in the future and hope that my few thoughts can inform the debate envisioned by the UCEA session to which this paper is presented.

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