

6 Educational Leadership in Transition: Reflections, Integrations, and Paths Forward

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<https://doi.org/10.26493/978-961-293-504-7.6>

The Time to Rethink Educational Leadership

Based on the collective chapters of this edited volume, we can conclude that the demands on educational leaders have never been greater. Ansell and Boin (2019) mentioned that modern societies are increasingly faced with ‘unknown unknowns.’ Yet, they argued on the important role of a leader during the outbreak of a challenging time. In particular, they argued that when challenges emerge in societies, constituents look to their leaders to protect them and deal with the crisis to address any possible consequences (Ansell & Boin, 2019). Crises and emergency situations, including COVID-19, have reshaped school leaders’ practices (Harris & Jones, 2022; Kafa, 2021). Specifically, Striepe and Cunningham (2022) stated in a scoping review of empirical research studies on school leadership during times of crisis, that crises impacting school organizations are divided into natural and human disasters. Natural disasters include fires, hurricanes, tornadoes, and so on, whereas human disasters include numerous school disasters, shootings, and deaths, among other things (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). In different contexts, not only disasters but also other challenges were amplified during and after the COVID-19 lockdown (Sia et al., 2023). For example, communication with parents has been changing, expectations of schools’ stakeholders have been changing, and pressures on schools are increasing.

Therefore, demands on educational leaders have never been greater. Based on the chapters of this edited volume’s challenges, contextual elements, quality issues, professional well-being, and the importance of

understanding leadership beyond the aspects of management and principalship and within the context of principalship have emerged as crucial for reimagining leadership in this changing world. Based on the thematic aspects of the chapters, *theoretical frameworks, empirical insights, and lived experiences were presented to build more equitable, inclusive, and humanizing leadership models*. Educational leaders are navigating uncharted waters and an increasingly complex environment, shaped by societal inequality, emotional strain, policy accountability, and a global call for inclusivity. Therefore, the time calls to rethink the educational leadership field and support educational leaders across various educational sectors to lead successfully and effectively.

In such situations, there is often an attempt to find ‘the’ right model, ‘the’ right style, ‘the’ right ... This book emphasizes the contextual and legal frameworks within which school leadership, principalship and management are embedded. A methodological diversity has to address nuances and allow for culturally bounded and context-sensitive interpretations of empirical data. New old issues require new approaches in practice, refocused research and changes in education policies. The neoliberal approach did not provide the expected results in improving equity, inclusion, teacher well-being and students’ academic results. Marketization-based policies and the ‘tyranny of choice’ (Salecl, 2011) have not resulted in better education systems, as many authors argue. Therefore, reconsidering the future of education will require a distance from neoliberal politics and a closer movement towards the essence of education. Schools must become student-centred again, and teachers must be empowered and act autonomously. The teachers’ call for ‘protection’ from stakeholders’ demands requires more than only techniques and skills. It calls for different education of future teachers and professionalization of principalship.

What Have We Learned from the Chapters of this Edited Volume?

Based on the perspective of rethinking the educational field and on the contributions of this particular edited volume, we need to understand the lessons learned to form specific implications and set the future path for the field. The opening chapter by Fuentes and Camas Garrido presents a compelling argument that educational leadership must be grounded in *emotional intelligence, inclusive values, and ethical conduct*. The chapter highlights the *emotional labour* of leadership, where empa-

thy and care become indispensable to building trust, motivating staff, and fostering equitable learning environments. The challenge to dominant neoliberal logics that reduce leadership to metrics and accountability makes this framing particularly important. By centring on relationships, emotional well-being, and cultural responsiveness, Fuentes and Camas Garrido push for a leadership paradigm that is *relational rather than transactional*, and *transformative rather than managerial*.

Following and building on the first chapter, this need for contextually responsive leadership is taken further in Chapter 2 by Nedzinskaitė-Mačiūnienė and Kafa, who explore how *economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS)* moderates and mediates the relationship between leadership practices and student science achievement using OECD PISA data. Their findings show that *instructional leadership alone cannot overcome the structural disadvantages faced by students in low-ESCS settings*. This chapter critically reveals the *limitations of generic leadership prescriptions*, especially in centralized or stratified systems. Rather than treating leadership as a universal toolkit, the authors argue for *adaptive leadership* strategies that account for local inequalities and systemic constraints. Their analysis strengthens the volume's core argument: *leadership must be situated within its specific policy, institutional, and social context*.

In Chapter 3, Luna Pérez and Domínguez Rodríguez offer a comparative lens to understand leadership practices across Chile, Canada, Singapore, and Australia. Their comparative analysis of national leadership frameworks shows how different systems prioritize pedagogical leadership, community engagement, and resource management, often in response to both international standards and local demands. Despite contextual differences, several converging themes emerge. Effective leadership is increasingly linked to professional development, distributed authority, and stakeholder collaboration. These global cases suggest that policy frameworks that support leadership development, particularly those that promote reflection, autonomy, and ethical action, can enhance educational quality and reduce inequality. Therefore, we can argue that educational leadership is shaped by a variety of aspects, including historical moments, political systems, national values, etc.

The discussion in Chapter 4 focuses on a critical and modern aspect of educational leadership, referring to teachers' well-being. Through a systematic literature review, Šimkutė-Bukantė and Žydzūnaitė demonstrate that leadership styles such as transformational, distributed, au-

thentic, supportive, and empowering are positively associated with teacher professional well-being. Especially in an era where everything is changing, teachers' well-being is important. They are leaders within the classroom who support our students. Their direct contact with students and parents and the role of school leaders calls for sustaining and promoting teachers' well-being. Therefore, from Chapter 4 we draw a conclusion that teachers' well-being is crucial for effective leadership. When teachers experience burnout, stress, or a lack of support, it negatively impacts students' learning. Therefore, school leaders must develop competencies to support their teaching staff in centralized and decentralized education systems. Supporting teachers does not mean removing roles, duties, or requirements from their responsibilities. Instead, teachers should be highly motivated, knowledgeable, and skilled professionals who can thrive in demanding environments, supported by positive relationships with colleagues that enhance their well-being.

Finally, in Chapter 5, Kovačič and Trnavčević explored the often-blurred lines between principalship, management, and leadership, particularly in the context of Slovenia. We have learned that in many educational systems, including Slovenia, the legal and policy frameworks often constrain leadership by framing it through managerial and administrative logics rather than promoting leadership. To discuss school leaders' and principals' transformative potential, it could be useful to research the principalship and principals' roles in the broader context of leadership. Principals are central figures in schools if we look at them from the position of power, authority, and organizational structure. They are accountable and responsible for the school in general. As such, they have to identify their transformative potential and managerial 'smoothness.'

We can summarize the content of the book in seven postulates:

1. Context matters deeply
2. Leadership is a human practice
3. Teacher well-being is a prerequisite for school effectiveness and improvement
4. Understanding and addressing challenges (including crises and emergencies) requires new knowledge, skills and attitudes for new times
5. Quality matters in every aspect of the educational leadership field
6. Management and leadership are intertwined, while principalship

has to be navigated between the policy framework and leadership and management practices

7. There Is No One-Size-Fits-All Model

What are the Implications?

Building on the findings from the collective chapters of this edited volume, the following implications for policymakers and future research are presented.

Policymakers

- *Context matters.* School leaders can respond to and address the needs and challenges in their environment. The era of ‘policy borrowing’ only seemingly faded away. Education policies round the world have been designed on the implicit or explicit, endogenous or exogenous practices of policy borrowing. We can observe different forms of policy borrowing (Gupta, 2022; Nishimura-Sahi, 2020). Clapham (2023) discusses policy borrowing from contexts associated with high performance in international league tables. Globalization has brought about ‘sameness,’ similarity, and interconnectedness (Bauman, 1998); notions that are often ascribed positive connotations and that facilitate international comparative research, such as PISA. However, they also amplify competition and other policy decisions and marketized practices, such as league tables (Clapham, 2023).
- *School leaders’ professional development on addressing current societal challenges, crises and emergencies matters.* Potter and Chitpin (2020) discuss professional development in the highly neoliberal context of the English schools in Ontario and emphasize professional critique and data analysis methods that are beyond statistics. Policy makers need and must have data that goes beyond the numbers. In Chapter 4, Šimkutė-Bukantė and Žydzžiūnaitė point out the need for mixed methods research design. The dominant, quantitative research has to be accompanied by qualitative and mixed methods research designs to get better and in-depth understanding of current phenomena. This is an implication for further research but also a recommendation to policy makers to incentivize professional development through financial incentives and to encourage principals and school leaders to make use of their reflective

practices. An action research methodology could add to informing policy-makers and indicate more specific needs emerging in specific contexts. A bottom-up approach to identifying professional development needs rather than a top-down approach has been advocated (Lafferty et al., 2024). However, as Miranda et al. (2024) argue, due to the highly complex political environments, school leaders need to build political awareness. Such topics are not frequently included in teachers' and principals' professional development; however, they would help them to better navigate through policy and political complexity.

- *Strengthen school leaders' understanding and awareness of teachers' well-being.* This is a prerequisite for the success of the teaching and learning process. School leaders cannot directly influence working conditions, such as teachers' workload, the quality of physical conditions of schools, and the policies of accountability. However, school leaders have a direct impact on creating a positive, inclusive, and motivating school culture through school policies and norms, and job satisfaction (Dreer, 2021).
- *Promoting the leadership aspect of educational leaders beyond the concepts of managerialism and administration.* A clear distinction must be made between managerialism and management. Managerialism carries a pejorative, critical connotation in education (Santiago & Carvalho, 2012). For example, the journal *JCEPS* (Journal of Critical Education Studies), regularly publishes academic articles on managerialism, marketization of public education, the impact of New Public Management (NPM) on education and other topics related to and emerging from NPM application to the field of education. Also, 'leaderism' as a concept has emerged in a pejorative connotation. O'Reilly and Reed (2010, p. 960) define leaderism as 'an emerging set of beliefs that frames and justifies certain innovatory changes in contemporary organisational and managerial practice – is a development of managerialism and that it has been applied and utilized within the policy discourse of public service reform in the UK as part of the hybridization and evolution of NPM and new public governance practices in the public services.' So, when discussing management and leadership, we need to embed the discussion in a broader political context. A bottom-up approach to policy development can contribute to a humanistic un-

derstanding of leadership, and place principalship in the service of it. It also highlights leadership and management from a specific perspective.

Future Research

At the end of this book, we also look at future research. Our ideas go beyond the book. We are very much aware of the need to research new practices, concepts and ideas that are somehow introduced into educational management and leadership from other fields or cultures. Well-being is a good example of a new concept in education. Comparative studies in the international arena will unfold new understandings and lead to improvements in practice. Hence, *advanced contextual research* that explores how educational leadership, management and principalship are enacted in varying socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional settings is needed. Further investigation of the intersections between educational leadership and new challenges, such as advanced digitalization and technological development, will enrich the field of education.

Šimkutė-Bukantė and Žydzūnaitė, in Chapter 4, identified the need for a mixed-methods research design. Their observation leads to rethinking the methodological issues in educational leadership, management, and principalship. Advanced qualitative approaches have to be applied, and an understanding of their philosophical, epistemological and methodological paradigms considered. One example of a lost paradigm is generic qualitative research. There are many pitfalls of such research (Kahlke, 2014), although it may be beneficial in some other fields, like nursing. We need a critical rethinking of the methodologies used to generate new knowledge and reflexivity rather than reflections.

Beyond all said, we would like to draw the attention of researchers in the field of educational leadership, management and principalship to meta-analysis, to building research on already existing studies, especially qualitative studies from within national contexts. There are so many opportunities to generate knowledge, but they require knowledgeable and open-minded researchers.

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