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**Abstract**

Educational leadership has been the subject of a myriad of research studies with a plethora of checklists and frameworks, and most educational systems advocate for the evaluation of school leaders against principles of effective school leadership. However, the complexity of leadership is far more than adhering to predetermined frameworks and standards. This chapter delves deeper into the practices of a small sampling of school leaders as they reveal their stories of school leadership. Three sets of data from Australia, South Africa and Canada have been analysed with an emphasis on exposing the emergent themes, and bringing together a heightened level of understanding of, and empathy for school leadership across three countries.

**Key words**

Principal leadership

School improvement

## Leadership roles

### **Introduction**

It could be assumed that research into school leadership might be exhausted and it is now only a matter of actually doing the job. Most educational systems are currently advocating for the evaluation of school leaders and their leadership against a set of adopted or developed principles: the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Professional Standards for Principals in Australia (AITSL 2014); the South African Standard for Principals (DBE 2014); and the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) (Ontario Ministry of Education 2013). So, the standards of expectation are set.

Linda Darling-Hammond and others debunked the myth that principals are just born, and presented the case that they can be made (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe et al. 2007). This might be a turning point for acknowledging that school leaders experience the highs and lows of professional learning on the job, and, that a deeper awareness and understanding of their experiences might present richer appreciation for the complexities of school leadership across different cultures.

Of significant interest to this study is that the same research method has been used to expose the data of school leaders from Australia, South Africa and Canada. Albeit small samples from each of the countries, the quality of the data is in the richness of the personal stories that have been gained because of the generous and authentic sharing of each participant. The three sets of data have been analysed by country with an emphasis on exposing the emergent themes, and then brought together to bring the findings to a heightened level of understanding

of, and empathy for, the differences and similarities of school leadership across three countries.

### **Background to school systems in three different countries**

#### **Australia**

Australia is a federation of states and territories with funding for education coming from both the state/territory and federal governments. A joint Government body (Council of Australian Governments - COAG) provides a forum where State and Federal Ministers agree on areas of cooperation (<[https://www.coag.gov.au/schools\\_and\\_education](https://www.coag.gov.au/schools_and_education)>). They have established an independent statutory authority, The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), to develop and coordinate but not implement structure and policy in these areas (<http://www.acara.edu.au/>). Also established is The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL <<http://www.aitsl.edu.au/>>) which is governed by an independent Board of Directors appointed by the Federal Minister for Education and Training. This Institute has established a Professional Standards for Principals framework (AITSL 2014), which sets out what principals are expected to know, understand and do, and provides guidance for state and territory governments in relation to principal accountability.

Australian schooling is offered through public and private operations. The public systems are controlled by each state and territory government and determine all matters education, developing their own implementation strategy for national curriculum, system organisation and professional development. The private system consists of religious education systems and other individual authorities with each school registered to offer education relevant to the state in which they reside and directly funded by the federal government, with some states providing additional funding.

Both the public and private systems have developed their own policies related to principal selection, professional development and appraisal processes. Across Australia there is no common preparation requirements for principalship, however aspiring and established principals are encouraged to upgrade formal education and participate in professional learning opportunities offered by public and private education systems, AITSL and/or professional associations. In a recent OECD report (TALIS 2014) only 27% of Australian principals reported receiving weak leadership training in their formal education. Most principals rise from the classroom and are promoted into leadership positions, essentially learning on the job.

The Australian schools explored in this chapter are located in the Catholic Education system of South Australia (CESA). A typical role description for employment would include: leadership in faith and religious education; a community leader; the one responsible for the smooth operation of the school's resources; and ensuring excellent teaching and learning. Selection criteria would not include the requirement of formal education and training (see [<cesa.catholic.edu.au/working-with-us/>](http://cesa.catholic.edu.au/working-with-us/)).

### **South Africa**

The education system of South Africa consists of two national departments, namely the Department of Basic Education (DBE), (primary and secondary schools) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (tertiary education and vocational training). There are nine provinces in South Africa with their own education departments that are responsible for implementing the policies of the national department. Provincial officials and Circuit Managers act on behalf of the Department (DBE 2014).

The South African education system might be described as a mixture of first and third world institutions consisting of a few top functioning schools but many dysfunctional schools with poor teaching and learning cultures. The education system deals with many difficulties such as violence in schools, long distances travelled by learners, learner dropout, learner-teacher ratio, language of instruction, socioeconomic status and poverty (Chikoko, Naicker & Mthiyane 2015). Furthermore, teachers in South Africa find it difficult to cover the curriculum due to absenteeism, unforeseen in-service training, union and departmental meetings during school hours and poor teacher content knowledge of subjects (Carnoy, Ngware & Oketch 2015).

South Africa does not require compulsory training and specific qualification for school principals. The only requirement for school principals is a teaching qualification and teaching experience: the way to become a principal is to “go through the ranks” (teachers, head of department, deputy principal, principal). Formal preparation is not mandatory, but the Department of Education has established the South African National Professional Qualification for Principals (SANPQP) focusing on “providing a practical, professional, certificated program for aspirant principals” (DBE 2014); and the Standard Generating Body (SGB) registered the Advanced Certificate in Education (School Management and Leadership) (ACE) for the professionalisation of school principalship with the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA). The ACE was recognised as a first step towards serving principals aspiring to become principals (Bush, Kiggundu & Moorosi 2011).

## **Canada**

Education in Canada for the most part is publicly funded and is overseen by the federal, provincial and municipal governments. In Canada, education is under provincial jurisdiction,

and all three schools in this study are within the Province of Ontario. It is the Ministry of Education of the Ontario Government that governs policy, funding, curriculum planning and direction in all levels of public education. This Ministry is responsible for curriculum guidelines for all elementary and secondary schools in the province. The ministry is also responsible for all 72 publicly funded school boards across Ontario, but it is not involved in the day-to-day operations (Ontario Ministry of Education 2016).

All principals/vice-principals require special qualifications to become recognised by the Ontario College of Teachers and to work within the province of Ontario in publicly funded schools. To become a principal/vice-principal, a person needs an undergraduate degree in education, five years of teaching experience, certification in three divisions, two Specialist or Honour Specialist additional qualifications or a Master's degree, and they are required to complete the Principal's Qualification Program (Ontario Ministry of Education 2016).

In line with a growing body of knowledge, research and literature highlighting a direct connection between effective leadership and improved student achievement and well-being, principals and vice-principals are viewed and expected to play a prominent role as instructional leaders in Ontario's schools. The OLF provides guidelines that direct leaders and organisations by outlining: traits of effective leaders; the characteristics of effective organisations; and common leadership language. This framework is in place to help facilitate effective dialogue, professional learning and collaboration (Ontario Ministry of Education 2013).

### **The global view of school leadership**

Definitions of leadership are many, often incomplete and as Dimmock (2012, p. 6) argues, the “concept itself is complex, multi-dimensional and inseparable from the social and organisational context and conditions in which it operates” [and defines leadership as] “a social influence process guided by a moral purpose with the aim of building capacity by optimizing available resources towards the achievement of shared goals” (p. 7). Drawing on the research of others he establishes five conditions for leadership, that is, it: exists within social relationships and serves social ends; involves purpose and direction; is an influence process; is a function and may not be confined to formal positions; and is contextual and contingent.

When the purpose of leadership is for successful school improvement it should be viewed as a “highly responsive and contextualised relational process” (Hallinger & Heck 2010, p. 106) and many argue, should be broader than the principal. Authors, for example, Harris (2013), Hopkins (2013) and Spillane (2006), indicate that extending (distributing) leadership is a way of increasing and extending a school’s capacity for better use of its “intellectual and social capital, with improved leverage strategies for teaching and learning” (Dimmock 2012, p. 113). Furthermore, Harris (2013), Hopkins (2013) and Lambert (2007), argue that it is the way people think about leadership that determines the leader’s practice, and research evidence indicates that without the full support of the principal establishing structural and cultural condition, a broader view of leadership will not be a reality (Day et al. 2009). Hallinger and Heck (2010) have captured the essence of the current debate when they conclude, that no single approach will work to improve all schools; leadership in itself is insufficient to bring about improvement; there is need to focus on culture and capacity for improvement; and there is need for inclusion of a broader range of leaders in school improvement capacity building processes.

What then is the role of the principal in school improvement? Ultimately, given the current established role positions, the principal is responsible and accountable for the effective operation of the school. Established in the research is the notion that principal leadership is the second most influential factor that accounts for variation across schools (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins 2008) and that principals may influence learning by shaping teachers' working conditions and motivation (Louis 2007; Louis et al. 2010; Walker, Lee & Bryant 2014). Other research has explored the contribution of principal leadership to improving school outcomes (Crowther & Associates 2011; Hopkins 2013; Robinson 2007; Walker, Lee & Bryant, 2014). Such functions as goal setting; resource mobilisation; enabling and engaging with other leaders within the school; effective communication; engaging with staff in professional development; and culture building have been included in the list. Such a list provides a starting point for the research in this chapter as we explore from a cross cultural perspective, the role of the principal in school improvement.

### **The shared data collection approach**

The methodology for this qualitative study used the interpretive perspective to collect and analyse data from school leaders in three different countries. The overall purpose was to explore the role of the school leader in leading school improvement with a focus on the following questions:

*What did the school leader do to lead school improvement?*

*What impact did this have on how they viewed their role?*

*How has this experience enabled ongoing leadership?*

The participants were nine school leaders, three from each of Australia, Canada and South Africa, who had been in their current schools for three years or more, and had been appointed



to the position based on prior leadership experience. This study has focused on school leaders in their leadership of school improvement.

Each school leader was interviewed one-on-one by the researcher of each country for approximately one hour. The interviews were semi-structured and school leaders were provided the questions prior to the interviews. The research questions included the following exploration:

- a. *What did the school leader do to lead school improvement?* [Structural processes/procedures/strategies - implementation and the relationality of how this was done.]
- b. *What impact did this have on how they viewed their role?* [The school leader's personal reflections in relation to personal and professional growth.]
- c. *How has this experience enabled ongoing principal leadership?* [The school leader's reflection on themselves in terms of current leadership practice.]

The analysis was completed in two phases. Firstly, the researcher from each country interrogated their interview data set to expose themes and independently presented the findings. The second phase involved a collaborative comparative analysis of the themes to determine what similarities and differences in school leaders' roles could be identified and thus enabled discussion in response to the overarching question: *what emerges as the role of the school leader in leading school improvement across three countries?*

**The stories from the principals (the nominated nomenclature for 'school leader' from each data set of this study)**

**From Australia**

Each of the principals selected for the Australian contribution adopted a systemically supported school improvement project, IDEAS (Crowther et al. 2001), which provided a processual way of meeting the mandatory CESA school improvement framework. While none of the schools were compelled to adopt a school improvement process, each of the principals independently had determined there was room for improvement. Each of the schools is located in the capital city of South Australia but differs in their socio-economic position, total enrolment and reason for embarking on the school improvement project.

The principals' individual responses have revealed a number of themes which, although quoted in different ways, have resounding affirmation in all three schools.

#### ***Commitment to context, cultural history and sustainability***

Having examined the results of the diagnostic survey built into IDEAS, each principal was able to clearly articulate why he/she had committed to it. As illustrated in the quotes following, their reasons were different. Interestingly, all connected under the themes of context, recognition of a specific cultural history, and a need to build capacity for sustainability.

Principal AU1 said “It was a bit of a traditional school. Not a lot of working together ... more working as individuals. So here, they've got a principal who wants to actually come in and see what they're doing and chat” which he believed needed to change in this already successful school if there was to be sustainable school outcomes and student achievement into the future.

Principal AU2 wondered “How can we reenergise what’s actually happening across the community; more importantly, how do we move forward in a way that’s going to strengthen and improve teaching and learning?” This was also recognition of what was already in place and how it was to be sustained.

Principal AU3 reflected on his position in relation to the staff: “I had a review ... and the staff indicated that they were feeling a little bit out of the loop in terms of some of the things that were happening in the school. It was fairly clear to me that I needed to change my style ... in terms of how I brought the school along. So when the opportunity to be involved in a project which opened leadership up to be a more sustainable way that more people's opinions and ideas could be part of it, I was very keen”.

### ***Ownership and trust***

Each principal readily stressed the importance of ensuring that whatever was to be successful would have to involve whole community - staff, students and parents.

For me sometimes I just have to make sure I'm not in the way, that I don't get in the way of things happening ... when the people feel empowered I think the trust builds up and builds up and people come in and have quite a vigorous discussion ... it's the trust and valuing of people. (Principal AU3)

I trust their knowledge and I trust their experience, and I trust they know their students really well. Much more than I would know because I’m not in the classroom often. And I trust their professionalism. I probably trust their, how can I put it, their desire to improve learning here. It is about that deep respect isn’t it, for each other.  
(Principal AU1)

During the interviews the principals spoke in varying ways about the importance of building trust, developing a trusting community through collaboration, taking risks, and “letting go”.

### *Educative*

For each principal in their own way and in response to their contextual needs, there was an appreciation for their role as the lead educator of this whole school improvement process.

Although not boastfully expressed, each one of them demonstrated this role:

Principal AU1 ensured that staff developed their professional knowledge aligned to their classroom practice: “Methodology has changed enormously. We work on things that are well researched. Now we've aligned literacy right across the whole school ... and there's guaranteed things happening in every room of our school”.

Principal AU2 drew staff into the conversation about the moral purpose of education: “This is what we're working on, it's what we believe is really important for our children and their learning, and how they can improve”.

Principal AU3 demonstrated a strategic approach to ensuring that the staff could see the purpose of their involvement: “I was fairly enthusiastic about the project and I tried to let people know that it would include a fair bit of work but a lot of good times too ... that we would do things together. I thought that the power of the people that were picked [as teacher leaders] took a lot of people with them”.

### *Personal leadership learning*

Of significance during these interviews was the readiness of each principal to share what it was that they believed they had learned about themselves, and particularly themselves as leaders.

Principal AU1 unreservedly admitted to the difficulties throughout the process but reflected on the necessary pathway that had to be forged: “So the frustrations that I was feeling as the principal in this school forced me I think to reflect a lot more on my work as a principal in this school. Looking back, it's far easier than when you are in the moment”.

Principal AU2 reflected on the importance of collaboration and the capacity building of teachers taking leadership: “I think the biggest learning for me in that process was around the importance of teachers being leaders, and I don't think we would have made so much ground without that committee, or that team, being involved”.

Principal AU3 admitted to having changed his perspective when he finally realised he had to trust the leadership of those with whom he had chosen to share the journey:

Probably the biggest point I had was when we were discussing - about our vision ... and I was thinking we should be going down a particular line. It wasn't until I let that go and let other ideas come in that everyone just sort of started to think this is great and I had to take a big step back. But that took a bit of soul searching I suppose to actually think that through.

Common to all three principals was the respect and trust for the moral integrity of each person involved and the power of effective communication to ensure that all were engaged.

This motive was eloquently summed up by Principal AU3:

Always thinking about where people are at, what's their depth of understanding, what's their depth of knowledge, and then what do we need to either refine, recap, refine, build on, so people can see the development? So planning, communicating, just filtering I think, all the things, the demands that come in around what teachers have to deal with. Communicating in different formats.

### **From South Africa**

The principals interviewed in the South African context were selected from two provinces and were representative of a primary and two secondary schools. The socio-economic status of the schools as well as the learner-teacher ratio are similar. Each year the schools must adhere to the compulsory School Improvement Plan (SIP), being completed and sent back to the Department. The SIP, provided by the Department, is an instrument for measuring the progress in specific areas in the school in order to develop a culture of teaching and learning. Although the three schools share similarities, one of the schools has experienced many challenges and therefore does not perform as well as the other two schools. However, an initial analysis of the three principal interviews has revealed several common themes of interest to this study.

### ***Appreciation of teamwork***

Each of the principals indicated the importance of appreciation. Teachers want to feel that they are appreciated for the work they have done, whether it is teaching, extra mural activities or duties assigned to them, especially the evaluation of the school which is part of the SIP. During the evaluation of the SIP, all nine areas are evaluated. The nine areas include basic functionality; leadership, management and communication; governance and relationships; quality of teaching and learning, and educator development; curriculum provision and

resources; learner achievement; school safety, security and discipline; school infrastructure; and parents and the community. Without the necessary appreciation from their side as principals, the evaluation of the school becomes a one-sided process and the basic purpose of the evaluation fails. This was clearly articulated by each of the principals of this study.

I think we've got very hardworking educators who are doing extra miles for these learners in terms of what they are ordered to do. So, I think you must appreciate the fact that educators at this school are working as a team and they're going all out despite all challenges that we must face to provide to this community. (Principal SA1)

Our vision is basically bringing about excellence in learners, to bring about improvement in learners, improvement of the teachers that will lead to improvement in the school as a whole. We have a good set of teachers. The teachers are particularly hard workers. (Principal SA2)

I think it's a way of varying the contribution of every member who is part of the staff and then recognising the fact that you cannot know all. You allow them to come up with their views and they must see you showing appreciation of their views so that they would also at least be able to also feel their confidence and they should realise that what we are doing is appreciated. (Principal SA3)

Without the efforts of the teachers the principals would not be able to evaluate the SIP on their own. The principals are aware of this and therefore appreciate the contributions of the teachers.

### ***Challenges***

All three principals agreed unanimously that it is a difficult task to bring about school improvement when there are various challenges which place pressure on them as principals.

Our challenges become greater, they [the learners] are coming from socially disadvantaged homes and they don't have the facilities that are necessary for them to develop properly, they lack all the basic facilities. The parents are not equipped to help their children and then it comes back to us. The Department forces us to pass learners that are not equipped for the next academic year. It has a very negative effect on us.  
(Principal SA1)

The parents are not involved in the education of their children. The children are exposed to drugs, violence and crime. Poverty plays a vital role in our education system. (Principal SA2)

The main concern is finances. We are not receiving enough money from the Department. Therefore there is a lack of facilities, resources and staff members.  
(Principal SA3)

The socio-economic situation in the quintile 1, 2 and 3 schools results in a lack of finances, proper resources and a lack of parental involvement. These are the challenges the principals have to face on a daily basis.

### ***Awareness of self and others***

One of the aspects that came to the fore during the interviews was the concept of awareness. Although the SIP is compulsory and could be seen as "something that must be done", the principal became aware of a number of important issues.



Principal SA1 acknowledged: The SIP makes me very much aware of the greater needs of the teachers and then I can determine the weaknesses of the teachers and probably use their strengths to put it in other areas where it is needed.

Principal SA2 viewed opportunities for himself and his teachers: I think I am this person who's very open to different proposals. In fact, when people question me I regard that as an opportunity for me to provide answers. I always think that with everything you do you can always better your performance, but whilst it's working we should check on better things so that we don't think that we've arrived in this way that we're arriving or that we arrive again. I don't think that I have arrived yet. So, every time I feel we must keep on with innovations in terms of how we implement things and check whether we improved the value.

Principal SA3 used the requirement as a checkpoint for his leadership: The SIP is like a "wake-up call". You think that everything is running smoothly in your school and you as a principal is well in control of everything. But during the evaluation process your staff identify needs and then you realise that you need them.

Furthermore, Principal SA3 also acknowledged the need for personal development and learning by explaining that "The thing that I've realised about myself is that you need to have skills, skills to manage, plan, delegate, to serve the school to the best".

The SIP changes one to become aware of the needs of others and to look out for the needs of all the stakeholders involved in the school.

## *Continuity*

The principals agreed that continuity is of importance for improvement. Not only continuous assessment regarding the evaluation of the school but also assessment and development of oneself, the teachers and the learners.

Every day you learn how to deal with different things in different ways on different levels. It is important to look for different solutions on a day to day basis. You cannot leave the SIP till the end of the year, once a month it is necessary to have a meeting regarding the Plan. You must continuously identify the needs of the school, the needs of staff development, your own [sic] personal growth. Often we neglect ourselves by giving the opportunity to teachers to develop and not ourselves. (Principal SA3)

The SIP is continuous. It's from the beginning and it is continuous and every year we leave a new necessity in the Plan. If an issue arises, if it's a serious issue that looms immediately, you know when we find what the issue is an issue will determine what strategies you would put together. (Principal SA1)

Needs must be addressed in the SIP so that when you check your progress column to indicate whether we are doing each of that, because the progress column will then be able to give the evidence. People come and check whether we are moving towards the right direction or not. (Principal SA2)

All three principals appeared to agree that to ensure improvement, the SIP must be first priority to ensure continuous updating and development in the interest of the staff members as well as the whole school.

## **From Canada**

All three schools in this study are under the direction of their District Board of Education and the Ontario Ministry of Education. All 72 publicly funded school boards in the province of Ontario must submit a yearly Board Improvement Plan (BIP) to the Ministry of Education. The School Improvement Planning (SIP) processes expected of each school must involve all school partners to ensure success.

The principal, responsible for administering the school and for providing instructional leadership, is ultimately responsible for improvement planning. However, the entire school community is expected to be involved in all stages of the process: planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating progress. The school improvement planning process is focused on three areas of priority: curriculum delivery, school environment and parental involvement (Ontario Ministry of Education 2016).

As the interviews took place and the data were analysed, themes emerged and are discussed below.

### ***Developing and maintaining a positive attitude***

All three principals discussed having a positive attitude towards their work-life responsibilities and their interactions with others. This attitude provides hope during the SIP process.

Principal CA1 confidently admitted that “By looking at the positive I am able to magnify my strengths and the strengths of my staff and students.”

Principal CA2 posed that “If we remain positive we have a much better chance to work together on the school improvement planning and focus on what is important.”

Principal CA3 affirmed that “We all believe in students, and this belief helps to provide a positive atmosphere in the school at all times.”

### *Positive relationships*

All three principals discussed in great detail the importance of positive relationship building and maintaining of these relationships in terms of the school improvement process. They all saw their role as being instrumental in creating and maintaining positive relationships built on trust.

I believe that when the students see staff getting along that this tells them how to act.

The students look to us as adults as to how to form relationships and what is expected here. (Principal CA2)

When I first arrived at this school, the behaviour was so out of control. The police were here all the time. Slowly through setting expectations for behaviour and learning with both staff and students and building relationships, the behaviour problems are almost non-existent. Three years ago when I arrived I would not have been able to sit here for this long without being interrupted many times. (Principal CA3)

Part of building trust was also being open, honest and authentic. “When I mess up, I admit it”, stated Principal CA1, and went on to say, “I always apologise if I know I have done something wrong. It shows trust and respect”.

### ***Decision making***

All three of the principals discussed the importance of the decision-making process when it came to school improvement as a collaborative process. The principals actively shared the decision-making process with the teachers, parents and students.

Not one single person has all of the necessary skills and knowledge to lead this school. (Principal CA2)

Staff volunteer to take on roles and to lead initiatives at the school. (Principal CA1)

Principal CA3 explained a process where the entire school community was mobilised to support the emotional, social, physical and academic needs of the students. This principal believed in the philosophy that “it takes a village to raise a child”. The other two principals also provided instances of whole school engagement in decision making relative to their contexts:

I give my staff freedom to make decisions. (Principal CA1)

The staff and students make decisions as to how to allocate resources, what programs should stay and what programs should go, based on our needs. It was tough to make some of these decisions, as some of the after school programs and sports teams were cut due to resource allocation and staff being stretched too thin. (Principal CA2)

As Principal CA3 stated, “sharing decision making is critical to moving the school in a forward direction, believing that all students can succeed”.

### ***Allowing the reflections and voices of staff to influence their decisions***

Principal CA3 stated that when he first arrived at the school there were many changes to be made from student achievement to student behaviour. This principal explained:

By the end of my first year student discipline issues had declined and we were seeing more sustainable improvements in student attendance. A few staff members approached me and said, “we really like the changes you are making, but can you slow down a bit, we can’t keep up”. I considered this a courageous conversation and was forced to take a look at the fast pace of these changes.

Although all the changes were great the staff were telling me that they could not continue at this very fast pace. I did not realise the impact this was having on the staff. I am glad that they approached me, as I started to involve them more in the decision making at a pace that we all agreed upon.

This is a powerful acknowledgement by a school leader willing to work reflexively with the staff in order to enhance personal leadership style.

### ***Providing a voice through conversations***

Two out of the three principals talked about the importance of having conversations with all key stakeholders surrounding what leadership is in the school.

I want leadership to go on well past when I am not here any longer. It needs to. I hold one-on-one conversations with staff as well as conversations in group settings.

Through these conversations I give the staff and school community members a voice on how they define leadership ... what is their participation in the leadership process ... this helps to work on developing a vision for future sustainability of leadership after I have left. (Principal CA3)

I like it when my staff come to talk with me about decisions or issues. My door is always open. The parents know this too. Students come to talk with me. All voices must be heard ... it helps me to decide what is important and what isn't. (Principal CA1)

### ***Formalised measures for capacity building and sustainability***

All three principals spoke of their leadership practices being grounded in theory and informed by the educational leadership philosophy of the OLF (Ontario Ministry of Education 2013). However, despite formalised measures in place for sustainability in terms of school improvement planning in the districts and the province of Ontario, the three principals lamented assurance of leadership sustainability:

I cannot guarantee that the school improvement planning process as it is now will continue when I leave. (Principal CA1)

There are no measures to ensure that what we have done here at this school will last or even be continued on with the next principal. (Principal CA2)

Ummmmm ... no (shaking their head and frowning) all of the hard work may or may not continue when I leave, it all depends on who is placed here ... I don't know ... I can't say. (Principal CA3)

### **Discussion**

The emergent themes from each data set viewed together reveal six roles of similar and different value as to how principals work with the task of developing a plan for school

improvement. These roles have been named and categorised in Table 1. Further interpretation of each role is explained following the Table.

Table 1: Principals' Roles in Leading School Improvement

<b>Role</b>	<b>Contextual category</b>
1. Producing the plan for school improvement	Structural
2. Diagnosis	Structural / Cultural
3. Relationship building	Relational
4. Educative	Relational / Cultural
5. Developing a personal leadership style	Cultural
6. Addressing the context	Cultural / Structural

### **Producing the plan for school improvement**

Each of the educational systems had requirements for each school to have a plan for school improvement. Despite the overall similarity linked to the tenet of improving school outcomes, the structure, the development and the expectations differ across all three selected systems. Australian schools individually develop their relevant plan framed by the systemic school improvement framework. The South African Education Department produces a mandatory systemic SIP and all principals explained how they must adhere to it and report in order to meet the requirements. Canadian schools work within the parameters of the BIP and each of the principals spoke of their responsibility to ensure the development of a SIP which must engage all stakeholders in the particular context.

### **Diagnosis**

Each of the principals spoke of some way of diagnosing how they responded to the task of school improvement, however, how it was done, and for what purpose differed in each context. The Australian principals responded to a diagnostic survey that had engaged staff, students and parents, which provided a basis for engaging staff in conversations that responded to specific needs of their contexts. The South African principals spoke of having to tick off each item of the SIP as “something that must be done”. The Canadian principals



explained that they responded to the annual mandate of the Board by prioritising the focus of their school.

### **Relationship building**

Overwhelmingly, all principals of this study were concerned about the importance of building and maintaining relationships between themselves and the teachers. However, the way in which that was expressed differed in each data set. The Australian principals appeared to be genuinely concerned about a sense of ownership and trust developed amongst the staff. The South African principals focused on teamwork and appreciation for the teachers' contributions. The Canadian principals focused on relationship building as a key focus for working towards attaining positive relationships built upon trust and respect.

### **Educative**

This role appears to be an extension of the previous focus on building relationships. It is termed the educative role of the principal in relation to the organisational culture whereby there is an intention to move the culture of leadership beyond the sole responsibility of the principal. In the Australian schools there was repeated evidence of the principals working toward fostering the leadership of teachers in the school improvement process. The principals of the South African schools tended to go beyond their role as school leaders by encouraging other stakeholders to complete the SIP with a teamwork approach. The Canadian principals had a commitment to lead that carried with it an ownership for the collective as well as for themselves.

### **Developing a personal leadership style**

The relationship of the personal leadership style to the culture of the system within which the principal operated emerged as a factor in determining how the educative role of the principal influenced the development of a personal leadership style. Whilst this study is in no way intended to draw generalised conclusions, analysis has drawn attention to the complexity of context and culture whereby what appears to be valued in the relationship between systems and schools, principals and teachers has bearing on the resulting styles of leadership. The Australian principals appeared to operate liberally and open-mindedly as learners of leadership, encouraging and letting others take a lead, make decisions, and demonstrate leadership. The South African principals appeared to feel somewhat curtailed by the prescription of the mandated SIP with little scope for the principals to show initiative in recognising growth in their personal leadership styles. The Canadian principals spoke of continually discussing their learning with regards to their leadership style as they listened to voices from all stakeholders, reflected upon their practices, and used data to inform their decisions.

### **Addressing the context**

This final role presents a more startling revelation that could be studied in greater depth to reveal how the principal has responded to perceived challenges in their specific contexts. For the Australian principals the important challenge was how to engage and motivate the staff to be involved in school improvement processes, and then to know how to sustain that engagement. For the South African principals the challenge was far more confronting as they faced many issues, such as poverty, illiteracy, and lack of resources (Van Wyk & Van der Westhuizen 2015, p. 172). Evidence suggests that they applied themselves with diligence to the task of completing the SIP, but found difficulty in taking ownership of it in their context or seeing the value of the exercise as an opportunity to develop themselves. In Canada, the

educational system has put in place mechanisms to try to ensure sustainability but, there is no framework in place to support the building and maintaining of a culture of sustainability, and the principals expressed concern for what they have in place might not necessarily be continued after they left.

## **Conclusion**

The greatest value in this relatively small study has been the richness of the principals' voices. Each principal generously shared their perspectives and provided opportunity for valuable conclusions within the parameters of this chapter. Of significance is the interpretation of the principals' roles in relation to the context categorised as structural, relational, and cultural. The authors propose that this categorisation provides a sound basis for a larger research study. Such a study would extend the interpretation reached in this chapter, to enable a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by principals in leading school improvement in different cultural contexts structurally, relationally and culturally.

Overall, there is evidence to suggest that two specific factors contribute to the way in which the individual principal perceives the role of school leadership - the nature of the context, and the relationship between the system and the school.

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