Leading education beyond what works

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Abstract

Currently, the issue of inequality is one of the most pressing concerns in education and educational research. Factors such as increased socio-economic inequality, movement of people across national boundaries and refugees create major challenges for local communities and schools. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that teaching and leadership are informed by the best available knowledge to meet these challenges. This article, which is based on research on successful school leadership and school reforms, aims to explore what type of knowledge is used and, given priority, when politicians and administrators make decisions about improving education. The article also discusses what we need to know to address equity-relevant progress and improvement.

In the analysis, the role the OECD has in setting the agenda in educational research is problematized and methodological shortcomings within research traditions focusing on successful school leadership are discussed. A main argument is that our thinking about educational leadership must be complemented and informed by research which focuses on recent changes in the political economy that have challenged public education severely. To lead education beyond the agenda of what works, we need different approaches to research, including critical studies addressing the power structures.

Keywords

Evidence-based policymaking, research relevance, school leadership, power structures, accountability systems

Introduction

Currently, the issue of inequality is one of the most pressing concerns in education and educational research. Factors such as increased socio-economic inequality, movement of people across national boundaries and refugees create major challenges for local communities and schools. The concern is driven by increased awareness of achievement gaps across cultural groups (OECD, 2012; Schleicher, 2014) and analyses of deficit thinking that permeates school policies intended to

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address these gaps (Anderson, 2009; Berliner, 2007; Blackmore, 2006; Brown, 2004; Furman, 2012; Shields, 2011; Theoharis, 2007; Trujillo and Woulfin, 2014). As such, it is crucial to ensure that teaching and leadership are informed by the best available knowledge to meet these challenges.

This article, which is based on research on educational leadership and school reform, aims to explore what type of knowledge is used and given priority, when politicians and administrators make decisions about improving education. The article also discusses what we need to know to address equity-relevant progress and improvement and suggests studying educational leadership through the lenses of transformative leadership and critical educational policy where power is a starting point for the investigation (Gunter, 2016; Shields, 2010).

We know that school leadership has become a priority in education policy around the globe. Therefore, in the first part of the article I will discuss how research on school leadership is used in policymaking as well as the strong position the OECD has developed over time in setting the agenda both for leadership research and educational research in general (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). I will also comment on the issue of relevancy in educational research and the problem of interdependency between policy and research. In the second part, I will report some key findings based on a major research endeavour in which I have been involved since 2002. The project, known as the 'International Successful School Principalship Project' (ISSPP) (Day and Gurr, 2014; Day and Leithwood, 2007), has developed an extensive body of research across more than 20 countries about the work of school leaders who are recognized as being successful. In the third part, I will discuss these findings and point to some methodological shortcomings within research traditions in which the ISSPP might be positioned. Finally, I will suggest some implications for a future research programme for leadership studies.

A main argument I will put forward is that our thinking about educational leadership in educational research needs to be complemented and informed by research which focuses on recent changes in the political economy, which have been variously referred to as neo-classical, neo-liberal and fast capitalism. These macroeconomic changes have been accompanied by new forms of governance and have challenged the idea of public education severely (Gunter et al., 2016).

The role of the OECD in defining the research agenda

Educational research has highlighted school leadership as having a decisive influence on the educational success of children and young people (Day and Leithwood, 2007; Hargreaves and Fink, 2006; Knapp et al., 2014; Leithwood and Louis, 2012: Robinson, 2011). Researchers have generally assumed that leaders at all levels of the educational system are essential to improving school performance, but a key insight based on research is that leadership is best understood in context (Ärlestig et al., 2016).

In 2006, the OECD initiated the 'Improving School Leadership' (ISL) project in which 18 European countries and 4 countries outside Europe participated (Pont et al., 2008b). The aim was to provide policymakers with information to assist them in formulating and implementing policies leading to improved teaching and learning. A major assumption was that successful school leadership was a key to large-scale education reform and to improving educational outcomes. In reports based on this project (Pont et al., 2008b) and also in national policy documents across OECD countries, leadership is often portrayed as an unquestioned road to a promising future *if* one is able to attract the right people to fill leadership positions, *if* the core responsibilities are clearly defined and delimited, *if* school leaders are granted autonomy with appropriate support, *if* leadership is distributed and *if* leadership development is treated as a continuum.

In addition, the OECD invited researchers (myself included) to collect data and provide examples of 'best practice' of systemic and innovative approaches to school leadership from five countries. The sites were selected based on emerging evidence of positive results on international large-scale assessment like the 'Programme for International Student Assessment' (PISA), and evidence of innovative models of distributing leadership and promising practices for developing school leaders (Pont et al., 2008a).

In many ways, the OECD's recommendations, based on this ISL project, have implied a resolute effort to provide higher degrees of autonomy and to shift the organizational metaphors of schools from hierarchical bureaucracies to an image of communities of practice where professionals are in constant interaction (Pont et al., 2008b: 9–13). It might be seen as a paradox that the OECD's recommendations and models of 'best practice' circulate alongside another discourse of new public management, also supported by the OECD, which implies more external control of schools' and teachers' work, but these two discourses operate in tandem (Gunter et al., 2016; Møller, 2007; Møller and Skedsmo, 2013).

I will argue that within the OECD reports it is not acknowledged that seemingly politically neutral models of 'best practice' are still politicized. No solid critique of the current climate of performative accountability is evident, and the power structures within which education is located are not problematized. Therefore, it is appropriate to ask if the OECD's research projects and recommendations are deceptively presented in depoliticized terms. This is particularly the case with anything that carries with it a social justice oriented intent, which is quite politically charged because it typically requires a more redistributive or welfarist approach.

The ISL project was closely connected to the OECD's benchmarking and efficiency studies in which the world's school systems have been held up and compared to a small band of top-performers on international student assessment, and in which Finland has been the winning team for more than a decade (Sellar, 2015). PISA is now embedded within the intergovernmental structure of the OECD, informing the work of the organization in a number of areas, as well as shaping performance and risk management inside the national education systems. In the annual publication *Education at a Glance* the need to adapt to historical and cultural differences between countries is mentioned, and some tensions involved with making the indicators as comparable as possible have been highlighted. The OECD argues, however, that the analysis in this report can be used to assist governments in building more effective and equitable educational systems (OECD, 2015). As such, in order to establish comparability between cases, differences between educational systems have been downplayed, which is a prerequisite to importing 'best practices' from very different systems (cf. Steiner-Khamsi, 2013).

Although it is legitimate to measure and evaluate how well the schools are performing to inform education policy, numerous studies have demonstrated and exemplified how the OECD has enacted ideologies of technocratic rationality, causing countries with diverse traditions and cultures to assimilate their educational practices to apparently conclusive standards of technocratic rationality, economic competitiveness and market growth (Gunter et al., 2016; Hall et al., 2015; Hefferman, 2016; Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Ozga, 2009; Ozga et al., 2011; Sellar, 2015; Simola et al., 2013; Thomson, 2009). Lingard and colleagues describe this as 'a form of global "panaopticism", with the global eye functioning in a regulatory capacity across and within national states' (Lingard et al., 2013: 540). Another concern, highlighted by Carolyn Shields, is that such a policy permits educators to focus on equality and uniformity to the exclusion of difference, equity and social justice (Shields, 2015).

The discussion about evidence-informed policy research is not new. In 1995, a report published by the OECD raised the issues underlying the discussion and identified weak links between research, policy and innovation in education (OECD, 1995). Twelve years later, the call for

evidence-based policy research or the 'what works' agenda was reinforced with the report, 'Evidence in education: Linking research and policy', and the argument was legitimated by the 'fact' that most countries expressed concern about student achievement outcomes and dissatisfaction with education systems (Burns and Schuller, 2007). Although there was no agreement within the OECD on where to draw the line on what should count as evidence, in the report it was argued that identifying 'what works' was crucial in educational policymaking and that the best method for achieving this involved doing randomized controlled trials (Cook and Gorard, 2007). Setting a standard for good educational practice was important to improve education. The report did not elaborate on what should count as knowledge of success for whom and under what conditions, but, implicitly, it was about improving test scores in basic subjects for all children.

In a recent report, the OECD identified some challenges in evidence-based policymaking (Burns and Köster, 2016: 27). These included 'non-use' (i.e. data were not collected or capacity was lacking to allow for their use); 'misuse' (i.e. data were poorly collected, incorrectly interpreted or did not provide answers to be useful for decision making); and 'abuse' (i.e. data were manipulated to yield more favourable results or unintended consequences). Nevertheless, the OECD argues for more and better data about strategies for increasing student outcomes. The question remains: do more and better data provide the knowledge we need in order to address equity-relevant improvements in education? This leads us to the issue of relevancy of educational research.

The issue of relevancy in educational research

Relevance is difficult to define, in part because it is easier to recognize retrospectively than prospectively. Also, considering the wide array of actors involved in education, it raises the question of relevant to whom and for what? Leadership, teaching and learning in schools are highly contextualized in time and space, and what is helpful in attaining one goal may be harmful in attaining another. This makes the relevance of research and claims about 'what works' hard to establish.

Different perspectives within the research community assert different approaches to make education more relevant for practice. Some scholars argue for a more clinical approach. Such an approach would involve a focus on theory-informed practice, an overlap in the roles of the researcher and the teacher similar to medical researchers, and active engagement with the objective of study (Bulterman-Bos, 2008). Some have addressed the issue of relevancy from the position of action research or practitioner inquiry (Noffke, 2008), and another approach is design-based research which collects knowledge about what to do or how to intervene when one encounters recognizable problems in one's work (Mintrop, 2016). Within the design mode, teachers, school leaders and researchers can work together, try out activities and carefully record how students respond. The aim is innovative interventions for solving complex problems (Mintrop, 2016). Others have emphasized that the different orientations of teachers and researchers should be dealt with not by combining the two into an overlapping role, but by promoting a fruitful dialogue between teachers and researchers. Within this position, researchers can offer a theoretical mirror that allows teachers to see what is unique and what is routine in their classroom setting, while teachers can provide professional problems to spur theory development. Both can gain from the interaction and take advantage of the tension between the two modes of professional practice (Labaree, 2008). Researchers have chosen different approaches and different emphases, but all have agreed upon a need for a productive dialogue between researchers, policymakers and practitioners.

Such a dialogue about what counts as evidence to improve educational quality is, however, not as straightforward as it may seem, because the goals of educational organizations are both diverse and diffuse (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005; Labaree, 1997). Well-intentioned actions may inevitably lead to unintended as well as intended consequences, depending on both conditions and courses of

action. In addition, change can be promoted without any intentions as a starting point. Clarifying the issues surrounding the relevance of educational research is significant, but equally important is the need to problematize and discuss the research itself and the ends it serves. The educational field can be considered as a plurality of people and interests, and lacks a set of agreed disciplinary methodologies and foundational claims (Gunter, 2016). Research that addresses issues of social justice have tended to be less appealing among politicians compared to studies which provide hard science, statistics and evidence about what works. Therefore, as Helen Gunter (2012) has emphasized, based on her study of education policy in England during New Labour governments from 1997 to 2010, it is important to raise questions such as 'what type of knowledge is used by politicians?', and 'who are regarded as knowers and why?'

One challenge is that educational leadership is a political issue within which struggles over competing versions of the successful school are taking place (Gunter, 2001). Leading change processes in education is complex, and neutral change agents do not exist because educational change is also about power. Leading change may involve self-interest and, as Bourdieu (1998) has shown us, it is also very much culturally defined and class-based in contexts where education serves the interests of the privileged while others are educationally disadvantaged. Berliner has labelled educational research as 'hard-to-do-science' because educational researchers 'do science under conditions that physical scientists find intolerable … and [educational researcher] must deal with local conditions that limit generalization' (Berliner, 2002: 18). The context effects are significant because students, teachers and principals in schools are embedded in complex and changing networks of social interactions, and learning processes can never be completely controlled (Berliner, 2002). Therefore, 'randomized controlled trials', which often are highlighted as the gold standard of research, are extremely challenging to do in schools (Kvernbekk, 2013) and, particularly, within the field of educational leadership.

With issues of relevance in mind, I will now present some of the key findings and contributions of the ISSPP, in which I have been involved for more than ten years.

ISSPP's contribution

The ISSPP has, over more than ten years, constructed case studies of successful principals across more than 20 countries, and provided accounts of thinking about leadership and achievements and cross-country analyses of what constitutes success in different contexts (Day and Gurr, 2014; Day and Leithwood, 2007; Moos et al., 2011; Ylimaki and Jacobson, 2011). It is probably the most comprehensive international study of school leadership ever undertaken across Western countries, and it continues to include new countries in the research. The studies, under the leadership of Professor Christopher Day, have been guided by a framework sensitive to context; in most instances, the schools were visited on many occasions, often over several years, allowing for longitudinal studies. In defining success, the project included both improvement in student academic attainment *and* improvement regarding students' well-being, citizenship and values. The research, which mainly included case studies constructed by the researchers based on interviews with principals, teachers, students and parents, has provided a window into the lived experience of successful schools and successful principals. It has also offered a celebration of the sustained, hard work of school principals across many countries and the hope they bring for better education for children and young people.

The goal of the ISSPP study has not been to produce another decontextualized list of what successful school leaders should do, but to understand under which cultural, social and political conditions leadership is considered successful. This is especially the case because some of the school principals were serving in high-stakes accountability regimes, like the English-speaking countries,

and were influenced by a push to a more market-oriented system of education, while others were located in low-stakes contexts influenced by a welfarist legacy, like the Nordic countries, which have emphasized education for the public good (Møller, 2009; Telhaug et al., 2006). Still, the values and beliefs that shape the educational vision as expressed by the participating principals have shown more similarities than differences. Although no magic formula for success has been found because leadership is best understood in context, in general, school principals leading successful schools look upon themselves as guardians of certain values that are now at risk around the globe (Day and Gurr, 2014; Moos et al., 2011). The research has also identified a repertoire of basic leadership practices across the many schools, such as setting direction, developing people, improving organization, developing trust and building a safe learning environment.

Evident in all stories, which are mainly based on self-reports was an ethic of care. The narratives were characterized by school principals' passion for their school, a strong sense of moral purpose, the building of relational trust, a focus on developing staff members, including themselves, and a strong commitment to promoting social justice, equity and excellence. Principals as well as teachers wanted to make a difference to the lives of children and young people. Telling their stories afforded the principals an occasion to enact their identity as a school leader; it functioned as a 'tool' for the legitimization of their actions (Day and Gurr, 2014). There was a strong focus on the experiences of marginalized groups and inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes in these stories. In the case studies, the principals were portrayed as being action-oriented and transformative, committed and persistent, inclusive and democratic, relational and caring, reflective and oriented towards promoting social justice. As such, there are many similarities with themes which capture what has been described as leadership for social justice (Furman, 2012: 195). It might be the case that some of these principals have major blind spots when they tell their stories in interviews or they know what should be the correct answers. But within ISSPP, teachers, students and parents are also interviewed about how the principal is leading the school, and they confirm the principal's strong sense of moral purpose. However, terms like 'an ethic of care', 'commitment to children' and 'social justice' are all elusive constructs which are politically loaded and subject to numerous interpretations (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). There is also vagueness or a lack of specificity about the nature of the basic leadership practices. Although it is easy to agree that each of the basic practices is necessary to improve education, it is not always clear what that means in everyday practice (cf. Shields, 2015). A practice like setting direction, or improving organization or building a safe learning environment will appear different when leading multicultural, socio-economically diverse schools are compared with leading more homogenous ones. Or it would be different if leading schools were serving more challenging populations. Leadership is context-specific, and therefore it is so important to contextualize these leadership practices.

In the next section I will identify some methodological shortcomings within research traditions in which the ISSPP might be positioned and suggest some steps forward.

ISSPP and some methodological shortcomings

In many ways, as demonstrated above, the ISSPP offers a celebration of the sustained, hard work of school principals across many countries, but in line with Pat Thomson (2009) I would argue that a problem with the collected narratives is that they easily end up being heroic tales of 'I did it my way'. Even though an important claim based on the studies is that school leadership has a greater influence when it is distributed, to some degree this research has contributed to the tradition of equating school leadership with the principal. Many of the principals may indeed be characterized as heroes in the way they challenge the status quo and fight for the best learning opportunities for their students, whatever the circumstances (Day and Gurr, 2014; Møller, 2012). By itself, there is

a risk of returning to the 'great man' theories of leadership (Thomson, 2009). In addition, the research may be criticized for focusing too much on personal capacities and, hence, obscuring the reality that a principal's work is embedded in wider social structures of power.

There is no doubt that policymakers add unnecessary pressures to the role of school principals and ISSPP has likewise demonstrated how the successful principals continually work hard to mediate government policy and external changes so that they can be integrated with the school's values. The principal's success as a school leader depends to a large degree on the relationship with the teachers, but also with parents and superintendents. However, the design does not allow for critical analysis of the wider power structure. A societal perspective is as important as the organizational one, as I see it. It is mainly a focus on leadership *within* an organization and a critique of a performative accountability regime is more implicit than explicit.

Therefore, to ensure that politicians and administrators are informed by the best available knowledge to meet challenges connected to the issue of inequality, it is important to complement or redesign studies of successful leadership to include a focus on changes in the political economy. In other words, how education systems in Western societies during the last 30 years have undergone major reforms influenced largely by new managerialist ideas, e.g. standards and measures of performance, output control, competition in provision and managerial accountability practices. It is crucial that politicians, administrators and researchers have a dialogue about the long-term effects of such policies to ensure an education for all children. It is also a matter of safeguarding school principals and teachers' commitments to equity within a policy environment that increasingly requires performative accountability. An alternative is to study educational leadership through the lenses of transformative leadership and critical educational policy where power is a starting point for any investigation into school leadership (Gunter, 2016; Shields, 2010, 2011). Such lenses enable a focus on research that locates professional work and organizational development within power structures, and enable investigations of how to transform the power structures to address issues of social inequality.

Politicians might have high ambitions to use empirical research as a basis for the policymaking process, but the tempo of policymaking and the tempo of empirical research are not well suited to one another (Nilsson, 2007: 147). Policymakers expect research to provide answers and not problematize a complex context, and often they regard educational research findings as ambiguous, conflicting, insignificant, untimely or only partially relevant (Sebba, 2013: 395). This is particularly the case if the research is anchored in critical theories. In line with Rick Mintrop (2016), I would also argue that addressing power structures may cause discomfort for those in power as well as political conflicts with those who have benefited from inequities. Based on the research agenda set by the OECD, we know that some research knowledge has been celebrated by policymakers and administrators while research which problematizes power structures has often been marginalized.

Although models of distributed and shared leadership have gained ground both in research like ISSPP and in policy documents, and leadership has been singled out as one of the main levers of educational reform, I would argue that the models are usually decontextualized and rarely address political and normative dimensions of this type of work. As a result, they leave school leaders vulnerable to believing that they are engaging issues of power when they are not, if they follow the prescriptions.

We also know, based on research within the network 'Leading Democratic Schools' (LE@DS) that school principals have been increasingly experiencing a work environment in which contracting, outsourcing, public relations, benchmarking and test scores have taken centre stage (Gunter et al., 2016). School leaders' time has been characterized by unpredictability, lots of uncertainty, deregulation and managerial accountability, leading to an environment where economic interests or efficiency demands have often overshadowed collective and public interests (Blackmore, 2011;

Thomson, 2009). Standards have become almost like a mantra for school reformers. Many countries have been experiencing an increasing trend towards developing a culture of performativity, and new public management reforms have distracted attention away from issues of equity (Hall et al., 2015). Across countries, much faith is put in assessment tools that provide data and information (Skedsmo and Møller, 2016). Both administrators and school leaders view the production and use of data as a legitimate way to address school- and student-level problems (Sellar, 2015). As a result, the production of knowledge about schools and systems is affected and problems such as educational disadvantage tend to be framed as technical issues. So far, problematizations of power structures have been given less emphasis within many studies of school leadership as I see it, and such knowledge is highly relevant for politicians and administrators who aim to improve their education systems.

Summing up

Although research on school leadership, like the ISSPP, has provided an important contribution to what we know about successful educational leadership across more than 20 countries, the available knowledge base also has its limitations. This is especially the case within research cited in OECD reports which have focused on improving equity in schools and have provided steps policymakers can take to build school systems that are both equitable and excellent (e.g. OECD, 2012; Schleicher, 2014). Although the reports briefly mention that education policies need to be aligned with other government policies, such as housing and welfare, to ensure student success, recommendations are mainly connected to improvement *within* organizations. For example, these recommendations include strengthening and supporting school leadership, stimulating a supportive school climate, attracting high quality teachers, ensuring effective learning strategies and prioritizing linking schools with parents and communities (OECD, 2012: 9–12). School leadership is viewed as the starting point for the transformation of low performing disadvantaged schools, and the discourse of equity is mainly connected to the framework of increasing excellence in literacy and numeracy and is based on data from international large-scale student assessments (Schleicher, 2014). As researchers, we have a responsibility to challenge the discourse in which this current policy agenda for equity is embedded.

The new language we have adopted in education may erode a broader discussion about education for citizenship and social justice over the long term (Møller, 2007). One of the main tensions seems to be between, on the one hand, discourses of competition and privatisation which underpin new public management and, on the other hand, discourses rooted in socially democratic ideologies linked to notions of equity, participation and comprehensive education (Skedsmo and Møller, 2016). We need to know more about the conditions and the processes which sustain education as a public good, and it is urgent that we manage to initiate productive dialogues with practitioners and politicians about knowledge claims grounded in rigorous research. As Helen Gunter (2016) has argued, both as researchers and politicians we should recognize that the field of educational leadership is a plurality of people and interests, where disciplinary knowledge from the social science is a resource opportunity rather than a set of agreed disciplinary methodologies and foundational claims. To lead education beyond the agenda of what works, we need different approaches to research, including reflective approaches and critical studies addressing the power structures.

Undoubtedly, the public has a right to know how well our schools are educating future citizens. That is why collecting data about school improvement is important. However, those who shape accountability systems for schooling should also be held accountable for doing it in a responsible way. It is necessary to operate on two fronts simultaneously. Improving education for all children in schools is hard work, as the findings based on successful schools have demonstrated. It is crucial to demand that policymakers and school officials invest the necessary resources where they are needed most and provide professional development so that school leaders and teachers can do a

good job. Jeffrey Henig has framed the concern with the established accountability systems in a striking way in his foreword to the book *The Infrastructure of Accountability*:

> The rush to get accountability systems enshrined in legislation and bureaucratic practice is running ahead of the evidence on its behalf, and this is true despite the fact that the architects of the accountability systems are also vocal proponents of scientifically based decision making (Henig, 2013: xi).

Finding the pathways to achieving equal education opportunities and promoting social justice in schools depends on public will, political decisions and legal regulations. The present performative accountability systems, with the strong focus on outcome measures on academic achievement, can easily push schools back into more conservative patterns rather than liberating them. The focus can be on raising test scores instead of serious concern about how to promote good education for all children. What is even more important is the risk of sacrificing equity in the enactment of the so-called evidence-based governing regimes. What counts as evidence should not be separated from deeper philosophical questions, because education is essentially a moral enterprise. Success requires that we ask: success in or for what, success for whom, who benefits, and success under what conditions? Education is and always will be a contested field.

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