



Contextual framing for school leadership training

Empirical findings from the Commonwealth Project on Leadership Assessment and Development (Co-LEAD)

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of (Co-LEAD) (Commonwealth project on leadership in education assessment and development), the overall purpose of which was to find out school leaders' training needs around the Commonwealth in order to provide some answers with regards to the professional development needs of school principals.

Design/methodology/approach – A mixed methods approach (e.g. both qualitative as well as quantitative) was utilized in order to carry out this study. The questionnaire consisted of 46 statements which make reference to the main functions of school leadership, such as, School Climate and School Improvement, Instructional Leadership and Human Resource Management, as well as Relations with Parents and the Community. The gap analysis method was used for the questionnaire items. Finally, complimentary to the questionnaires, it was decided to have on-site visitations and interviews with "real people" on the ground.

Findings – Based on the authors' analyses and interpretations, it seems that the greatest needs for leadership improvement and training are in three areas: Trust Building and Collaboration which includes Relations with Parents and the Community, promotion of cooperation with other organizations and businesses from the community so that students' needs are addressed and initiation of trust building activities within the local community; Encouraging Instructional Leadership and Human Resource Development which includes Instructional Leadership and Human Resource Management and systematic monitoring of instructional and managerial processes to ensure that program activities are related to program outcomes; and Initiating School Improvement and Development which includes the application of research findings to facilitate school improvement, the development of budgets based upon documented program needs, and the provision of opportunities to students to participate actively in school management issues.

Originality/value – This piece of research extends knowledge with regards to the expressed needs for leadership training and improvement for school principals. It documents that if such an endeavor is to be successful, it has to be contextualized and therefore, training should be region and country specific.

Keywords Commonwealth, Schools, Principals, Training needs, Educational context, School leaders, Needs assessment, International comparative approach

Paper type Research paper



Introduction or why does school leadership training matter?

In view of the complex and changing context of education, school leadership has gained growing attention by educational policy makers. School leadership issues have become increasingly debated and explored in an international and comparative context. This is mainly due to research evidence produced so far that the principal's role is indeed crucial for improving students' academic achievement (Marzano *et al.*, 2005). These societal changes and changes in the way education systems are managed have inevitably transformed the school environment into a more dynamic and complex one than in the past (Crow, 2006). The individual school is regarded as the central operating unit which will interact with other actors on the same level (other schools in networks) or with actors at the macro level (for reasons of accountability).

As a result, the various stakeholders have increased their expectations from school leaders demanding, for instance, higher academic results and performance standards. Apart from individual countries, international organizations are beginning to realize the key role of school leaders in providing access to quality education for all (EFA) students. This ascertainment has led to a growing recognition that the professional development of school leaders could contribute significantly to the improvement of their practices. For instance the EFA report of 2009 entitled "Overcoming inequality: why governance matters" states, that an effective learning environment relies on basic infrastructure, *professional leadership* (our emphasis), motivated teachers, sufficient instruction time and resources, the use of performance enhancing monitoring and evaluation, and adequate funding (UNESCO, 2008). In any case, there is a broad international agreement about the need for school leaders to have the capacity needed to improve teaching, learning, and pupils' development and achievement. At the same time, a growing number of countries all over the world (regardless of their international organizational affiliation) are struggling to attract well-qualified applicants to take on leadership roles. Also, despite the changing roles and higher expectations of school leaders, it seems that most receive little formal or structured preparation for the job. There is a wide agreement about the need to have school leaders who exhibit the capacity to improve the quality of teaching and learning that takes place in their schools. School effectiveness as well as school improvement research have demonstrated the importance of the role of the leader in school life. At the same time school leaders' roles and responsibilities have been (or need to be) reconceptualised. For instance, the (once) limited functions of a bureaucratic administrator are increasingly defined by a new, far larger and more demanding set of roles, such as enhanced administrative and managerial tasks. Furthermore, today's school leaders need to handle financial and human resources; manage public relations and build coalitions; engage in quality management and public reporting processes; and provide leadership for training their staff. Therefore, there is a need to recruit and develop a new generation of school leaders with the knowledge, skills and dispositions best suited to meet the current and future needs of education systems (OECD, 2008b). But if school leadership is so important, then we should also be concerned with how leaders learn to do their jobs in ways that contribute to student learning (Crow *et al.*, 2008). However, the support and training they receive seems to be insufficient for all the aforementioned tasks that they are expected to perform. Under the light of this concern, a global focus on leadership development has begun to evolve.

What do school leadership support systems look like so far?

In fact, many countries have come to realize the importance of investing in school leadership support systems. Policy makers in mainland Europe, North America, and Austral-Asia have launched programs designed to support leadership development in education (Hallinger, 2003). First, the USA, compared to other nations, responded early to the call for school leadership development. More specifically, even since the 1980s, a Master's degree in Educational Administration should have been acquired in most American states before applying for a leadership position. In the UK, inspection evidence produced by The Office for Standards in Education has guided the government's work on identifying and preparing prospective principals, developing experienced ones and establishing the National College for School Leadership (Southworth, 2002). The latter has introduced the National Professional Qualification for Headteachers for prospective principals and the National Professional Qualification for Serving Headteachers for the development of practising principals (Weindling and Dimmock, 2006; Briggs *et al.*, 2006). Additionally, in Hong-Kong prospective principals should acquire a Certification for Principalship in order to meet the requirements for the specific position while serving principals are required to undergo a continuous development programme for about 50 hours per year during a three-year cycle. In Ontario, Canada prospective school leaders have to follow the Principal Qualification Program offered by ten universities in Ontario (Huber and West, 2002). Moreover, in the York district of Ontario, principals receive an annual amount of US\$800 to spend on conferences and training (Bush and Jackson, 2002). These are only but a few examples of the increasing attention granted to school principals' development worldwide.

What kind of professional development do principals need?

It is essential to review the literature on every one of these aspects in order to gain a holistic picture of what kind of professional development principals really need: in other words an analysis of the major issues and challenges in redesigning the roles and responsibilities of school leaders and in attracting, developing and supporting capable people to fill those roles. Based on the existing body of literature on the professional development needs of school leaders a number of relevant questions as well as suggestions arise, as can be seen in the following subsections.

To what extent are context and training needs related?

International policies need to be sensitive to the role played by national context (Davis *et al.*, 2005) in influencing the implementation and impact of leadership policies aiming at developing à la longue effective leaders for educational institutions. It should be borne in mind that policy initiatives that work well in one country cannot necessarily be transferred across national borders. When it comes to the actual implementation of new training programs and delivery methods which prepare school leaders how to deal successfully with different contextual conditions (designing school leadership policies), it is important for governments to take account of contextual factors in order to respond more effectively to the different needs of school leaders in different types of contextual settings. Different contextual settings need different support systems and different development procedures with regards to the qualification aims, inputs, and procedures of school leaders' preparation on the job. The factors of those contextual settings could be located at the system level (policies with regards to school governance) or at the school

level (for instance location, student composition of the school, school size) and influence the action radius and leadership style of school leaders (OECD, 2008b, p. 20, see also Mulford, 2003). The context (factors) within which schools and school leaders operate can vary markedly across countries depending upon their historical traditions, social structures, and economic conditions. They can furthermore vary in terms of weight, pace and criticalness (OECD, 2008b). Furthermore, in order to be able to cater for these diverse needs it is important to decentralize the provision of these programmes. According to a number of researchers (Bush and Glover, 2004; Pashiardis and Brauckmann, 2008), leadership development should take into account the local contexts within which leaders operate; in other words the relationship between context variables of the system and their relationships with the roles, responsibilities and actions of school leaders. Restructuring school governance is one of the major themes in educational policy reforms. The two key elements of this reform are:

- (1) the shift from input steering (ex. Central decisions about curricula or distribution of teachers) to output driven control; and
- (2) that the medium level of educational management is given higher importance (i.e. giving more competencies to the individual school), while the macro level will be provided with new duties to monitor progress and to support the schools (Klieme, 2004).

Those structural/organizational features outline briefly the changing governance context in which school leaders find themselves as more and more countries are devolving significant management decisions to the school level and holding school leaders accountable for the results of their schools (Pashiardis and Brauckmann, 2008, see also OECD, 2008a). The main consequence of these reforms of the institutional framework of the system is that they alter the incentives with which also school principals within the school system are provided with (Wössmann *et al.*, 2007). The contextual predispositions at school system (Table I) are therefore the set of rules and regulations that determine rewards and penalties for those involved in the schooling process.

Professional development can then be provided by a wide array of sources such as universities, professional associations, governmental agencies and other organizations. Partnerships between various organizations may also enhance the training impact on school leaders. However, it is also necessary to have a central agency in charge of monitoring the quality of professional development programmes. As a result, central quality assurance in conjunction with decentralized provision of professional development is more likely to meet the needs of school leaders.

When should professional development of school leaders begin?

First, leadership development should be provided before appointment to the post (Bush and Heystek, 2006; Pashiardis and Heystek, 2007). Many countries seem to neglect this important dimension of leadership development thus leaving future leaders unprepared for their duties. However, the provision of adequate preparation prior to appointment may relieve the school leaders from the shock of transition and facilitate their socialization in the school environment under their new role. Professional development should also continue after appointment in order to support principals in facing the diverse challenges they encounter at the school place. To this effect, there is a need to establish training provision in relation to the different stages of leadership and after

Table I.
Contextual
predispositions at the
system and school level

		Implications on school leadership roles and functions	Research evidence base
System level	Autonomy	Establishing budget and accounting systems, choosing and ordering materials, setting up relationships with contractors and vendors, designing recruitment schemes for hiring Teachers, student admission criteria, determining course content	Day <i>et al.</i> (2009), Pont <i>et al.</i> (2008), Mulford (2003), Glatter <i>et al.</i> (2003)
	Accountability	Aligning instruction with external standards, setting goals for student performance, integrating external (performance standards) and internal (school program) accountability systems, monitoring of teacher performance (classroom observation), defining instructional objectives, interpretation of test results, mastery of skills with regards to data-based management	Pont <i>et al.</i> (2008), Pashiardis and Brauckmann (2008), Day and Leithwood (2007), Leithwood <i>et al.</i> (2009)
	School level	School choice Strengthening collaboration, forming networks, sharing resources, reaching out to their intermediate environment, coalition building, marketing, fostering parents involvement, develop niches for their school, acquiring resources (e.g. sponsoring)	Hopkins (2007) and Hargreaves <i>et al.</i> (2008)
		Schooling level Significantly moderates the effect of school leadership on pupil achievement, more time for providing classroom observation, more collegial and participative style	Leithwood <i>et al.</i> (2004), Leithwood (2007), Southworth (2002), Heck (1992)
		Diversity of student body Developing sensitive teaching methods, overcoming skills and languages obstacles, establish links with service providers	Jacobson <i>et al.</i> (2005), Leithwood <i>et al.</i> (2006)

leaders have been evaluated in a formative way and some specific training needs have been uncovered (Pashiardis and Brauckmann, 2008). To illustrate the point, the professional development needs of beginning and experienced principals are not identical.

What should be taught and how?

With regard to the content of leadership development, the most desired element brought up in most pieces of research concerns the practice of instructional leadership. The importance attached to this leadership dimension may be attributed to the fact

that the technical core of schools is related to teaching and learning. According to Hale and Moorman (2003, p. 19):

[...] policy and institutional leaders, must remember that the business of schools is teaching and learning, that all education policies must support student achievement and that all preparation programs must develop school leaders who can provide instructional leadership.

Experienced school leaders seem to need more training on instructional and strategic leadership skills while beginning school leaders seem to need training on technical issues as well, such as financial management. As a result, differences related to the principals' career stage must also be accounted for in any training schemes that are offered to them. Other important aspects that need to be included in the development process of programmes for school leaders concern school improvement practices, strategic planning, human resources management, and financial management. However, the emphasis placed on each of these areas should depend on the particular needs of each individual principal and the particular school context.

With regards to how the training programs should be delivered, in general, it seems that there is a need to combine a number of methods in the delivery of professional development programmes. Traditional, course-based programmes tend to be too theoretical and therefore they should be complemented by clinical training practices such as problem-based learning, mentoring and coaching and peer networking as well as experiential learning activities. These learning experiences are deemed to provide a more authentic approach to the real world challenges encountered by school leaders.

The Co-LEAD project

Purpose of the project

As a result of international developments such as those described in the preceding sections, education ministers of the countries participating in organizations such as the Commonwealth have emphasized the need to improve school leadership as a way to increase school effectiveness and achieve quality performance. In particular, the 15th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers of 2003 has concluded that aspirant leaders should be provided with the opportunities of training and coaching in leadership and management skills (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2003). In addition, the discussions of the 16th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers of 2006 raised the following recommendation (CCEM, 2006, p. 3):

Since school principals are key to facilitating and overseeing that quality teaching and learning takes place in schools, the professional development of school leaders through a contextually relevant school principalship qualification should be an approach adopted more widely among member states.

As described in the previous sections of this paper, professional development needs of school leaders may be determined by a number of dimensions related to the respective features of training schemes. These dimensions concern the patterns of provision, the design characteristics of the programmes, the delivery modes and the leadership areas in need of improvement. To date, research on these areas is scarce, especially around Commonwealth countries, thus the great expectations which were created, that the Needs Assessment Study commissioned by the Commonwealth Secretariat will form an initial base of evidence that future research and practice can build on with regards to school leaders' professional development.

Guiding framework of the project

Within this context, the two researchers who undertook the Needs Assessment Study developed the following framework which depicts the way forward in terms of school leaders' professional development for the twenty-first century (Figure 1). In particular they focused on the following guiding questions:

- In what kind of context do school leaders operate, at the system as well as at the local level? How well prepared are school leaders in performing effectively their duties (see column to the left)? In order to identify homogeneous groups among the countries with regards to their degree of contextual dimensions which have implications for school leaders and the institutions which they will lead.
- Where do their needs for professional development lie (see middle column)?
- Which forms of professional development do they prefer (see column to the right)?

These relationships can be depicted in the following Pashiardis and Brauckmann guiding framework. What could be done, given the limitations of available time and resources, was to create a meaningful guiding framework, using qualitative as well as quantitative methods. This would enable the findings to have a degree of consonance to and coherence with the practical experiences of other school leaders and teachers. It is held at this time that there are no absolute truths in social reality (Guba and Lincoln's, 1994), especially in a diversity of contexts such as the various countries around the Commonwealth exhibit.

The Co-LEAD research design

Based on the aforementioned guiding questions, two complementary analytical strands were chosen from a methodological point of view, as follows (Figure 2).

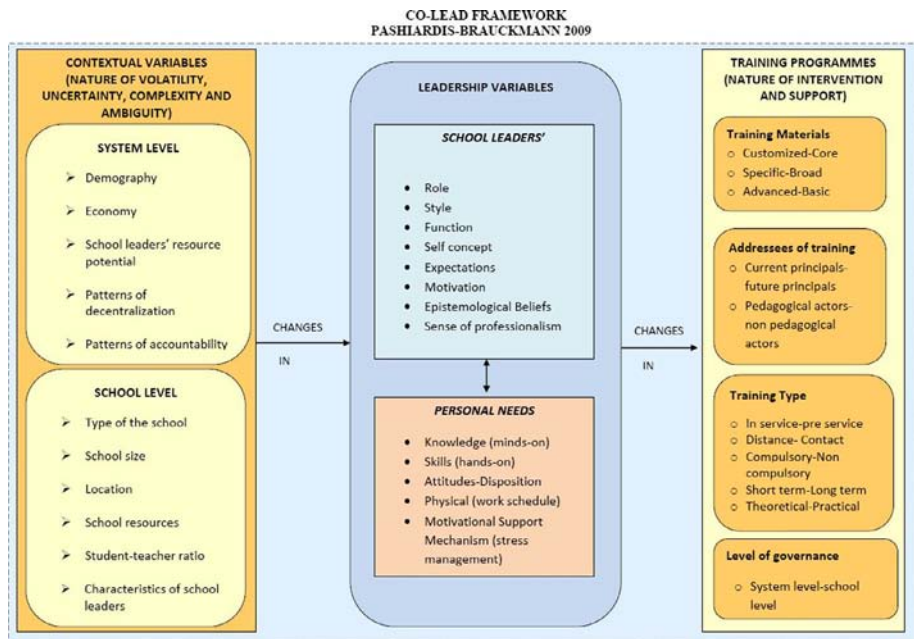


Figure 1.
The
Pashiardis-Brauckmann
Co-LEAD guiding
framework

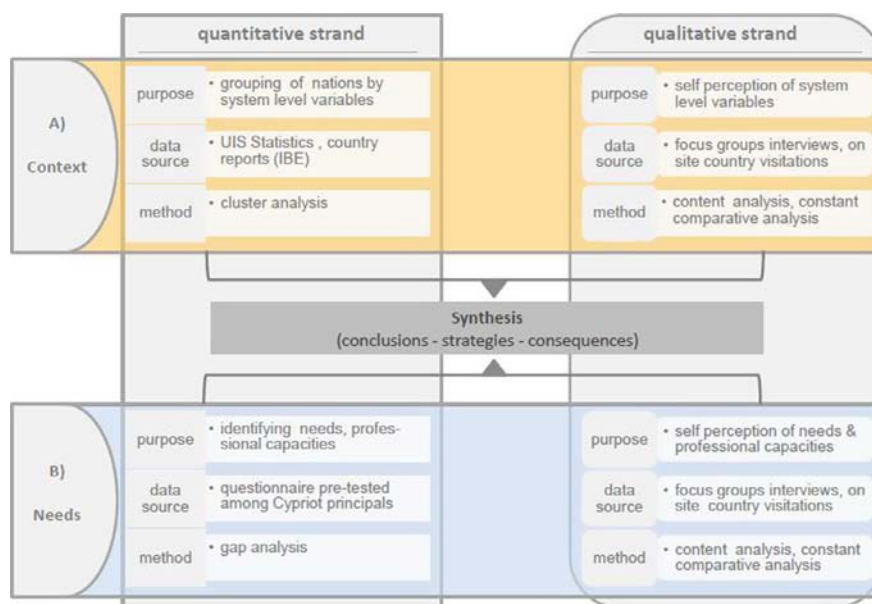


Figure 2.

Contextual factors/settings of school leaders. Using a variety of inputs and cluster analysis, this analytical strand examined the context factors of school leadership in selected Commonwealth countries, which shape the role and development of school leaders, and the range of policy responses to these factors. The cluster analysis-based regrouping of contextual settings in which school leaders operate and which can vary markedly across countries could be useful as background information when it comes to:

- the actual implementation of new training programs;
- responding more effectively to the different needs of principals in different types of contextual settings; and
- increasing the awareness of the role played by national context in influencing the implementation and impact of leadership policies aiming at developing à la longue effective leaders for educational institutions.

Assessment of professional capacities and needs for professional development. For the field work of the Needs Assessment Project we decided that a mixed methods approach (e.g. both quantitative as well as qualitative), would be the best, as one methodology complements and enriches the other.

Quantitative strand. School principals in the selected Commonwealth countries were provided with a number of statements taken from worldwide research on effective schools and effective school leaders (focusing mainly on research around the Commonwealth). Therefore, we constructed one questionnaire which was pre-tested among school principals in Cyprus (both secondary and primary) in order to examine its validity and reliability. The final questionnaire consisted of 46 statements which make reference to the main functions of school leadership. These statements were grouped in five areas:

- (1) school climate and school improvement;
- (2) instructional leadership and human resource management;
- (3) administration and fiscal/facilities management;
- (4) student management; and
- (5) relations with parents and the community.

There were two columns in the questionnaire with Likert-type scales on both sides of each statement. On the left-hand side of each statement they were supposed to circle the number which indicates the degree to which they currently implement each statement in their school. The number "1" corresponds to "very low degree" and the number "5" to "very high degree". On the right-hand side of each statement they were asked to circle the number which indicates the degree to which they feel that each statement should be implemented in their school, so that the school functions effectively. As previously, the number "1" corresponds to "very low degree" and the number "5" to "very high degree".

The purpose of this instrument (assessment of concrete needs), as explained to the research participants, was:

- to assist in identifying the needs of school principals around the Commonwealth;
- in identifying the current professional capacities of school principals around the Commonwealth; and finally
- to assist us in prioritising needs for leadership training.

Qualitative strand. We organised on-site country visitations and conducted separate focus groups interviews with the following kinds of persons:

- the country contact person;
- a group of school principals;
- a group of parents; and
- a group of teachers/ union leaders.

It was decided to have on-site visitations and interviews with "real people" on the ground in order to enhance and enrich the validity of our findings and enable the quantitative findings to have a degree of consonance to and coherence with the practical experiences of other school leaders and teachers.

Findings with regards to contextual factors/settings of school leaders

By regrouping the selected Commonwealth countries according to their mean contextual balance scores, they could be subdivided into four main clusters with regards to their contextual predisposition for introducing and shaping school leadership development and assessment. Interestingly enough, the new country groupings, which were revealed through the cluster analyses, can be identified (to some extent) as similar to the Commonwealth Secretariat regional clusters based on geography and can therefore be considered appropriate. In essence, what we are suggesting here is that the groupings of Commonwealth countries based primarily on geographic criteria are probably the most suitable one. Certainly diversity in geography is reflected in those contextual arrangements at the system level. Apparently, ethnic-make up, culture and history (as there are remarkable differences in history, even in recent times) might also be

reflected in those contextual arrangements and they are certainly very important to consider when offering various trainings and assistance to Commonwealth countries. Furthermore, “enhancing all stakeholders’ awareness of their roles and responsibilities as right-holders and duties-bearers” should be an important variable at least to bear in mind (UNESCO, 2007, p. 51).

Furthermore, based on the cluster analysis, the training and development of school leaders in the Commonwealth calls for an integrated, cross-sectoral approach to educational planning. Ineffective structures at the system level (inconsistencies in planning, neglect of framing antecedent variables stemming from historical traditions, social structures and economic conditions) will not turn out to be advantageous when it comes to the envisaged training and development of effective school leaders if appropriate institutionalized learning opportunities for those leaders are not in place. There might also occur problems in target setting for school leadership training. Unrealistic and inconsistent target-setting is a common problem and there is often a mismatch between goals, strategies and financing commitments when it comes to the planning and provision of school leadership preparation. Therefore, it is important to contextualise school leadership policies. Of course there is no single model of leadership that could be easily transferred across different school- and system-level contexts. The specific contexts in which school leaders’ work may limit school leaders’ room for manoeuvring or provide opportunities for different types of leadership. Depending on the contexts in which they work, school leaders face different sets of challenges. System-level context variables which demotivate and discourage current and potential school leaders will have an impact on the quality of the school. Why? Not motivated and committed school leaders (either by lack of intrinsic or extrinsic motivation) will not play a key role in improving school outcomes by influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers, as well as the environment and climate within which they work. If an effective systemic framing fails, effective school leadership cannot be developed, as the co-production of institutional and pedagogical turns out to be two distinct units of actions which point into different directions. Making leadership training a prerequisite or a strong asset can contribute to improved schooling through greater professionalization of the position, to greater satisfaction of principals in their jobs and possibly to increased numbers of candidates for positions. Especially in-service training can respond to need and to context. There is no standard way of providing leadership development opportunities, but a wide range of possibilities that may focus on particular contextual factors at a national, regional, local or school level.

Findings with regards to school leaders’ needs assessment – the field work *Quantitative part of the study-questionnaire description*

Description of the sample. Participants in the present study were 999 school principals from seven Commonwealth countries. In the total sample, a 48 percent of the principals were male and a 52 percent were female. With respect to the type of school, 89 percent of the principals were working in a government school, 7 percent in a private school and 4 percent in other types of schools. In addition, 63 percent of the principals were working in a primary school and 37 percent in a secondary school. With respect to school location, 42.4 percent of the principals were working in an urban school, 35.4 percent in a suburban school and 22.2 percent in a rural school. Finally, with respect to the principals’ education background 41 percent of the principals have a certificate/diploma, 32 percent

have a BA degree, 7 percent have a Postgraduate certificate/diploma, 19 percent have a Master's degree and 1 percent a Doctorate.

Reliability analysis. In order to be in a position to use the factors of the questionnaire in the subsequent analyses we proceeded to calculate their reliability coefficients. According to Table II, the Cronbach's α coefficient is greater than 0.76, which indicates a high degree of consistency of the individual item responses in each factor. These findings allow us to use the factor scores as the main variables in order to assess the needs of principals across the Commonwealth for the countries participating in this piece of research.

Main findings with regards to school leaders' training needs

At the individual level, the gap between the two questionnaire scales (IS, SHOULD BE) was computed in order to identify the degree of need in each specific item. For example, suppose that a1 represents the score for what IS the existing situation with regard to leadership and da1 represents what the situation SHOULD BE as perceived by the principals. Then, the formula computed for each case was $na1 = da1 - a1$, in which na1 represents the degree of need with regard to item a1. In this way, the gap for all items and all cases was calculated. Adopting the parsimony principle, the data were then aggregated to the country level computing the mean score of all principals from each country for each item and for each group of items as presented in the questionnaire. This was done for the IS, SHOULD BE and GAP data. In addition, the mean scores for the whole of the Commonwealth countries which participated in this study were computed in order to have a benchmark of comparison. In this way, we could reach more meaningful results and interpretations at the country level as well as at the Commonwealth level in general.

According to Figure 3, the principals from the Commonwealth countries that participated in this study had the greatest mean gap scores in the domains of relations with parents and the community (mean gap = 0.86), professional growth and recognition of staff (mean gap = 0.74), and instructional leadership and human resource management (mean gap = 0.64). With regards to the relations with parents and the community domain, items 46 and 43 had the greatest gap scores. Item 46 concerns the initiation of trust building activities in the community and has a gap value of 1.04. Moreover, item 43 is related to the promotion of partnerships with the community and has a gap value of 0.99. With regards to the professional growth and recognition of staff domain, items 38 (gap = 0.95) and 37 (gap = 0.94) had the greatest gap scores. Item 38 concerns the provision of rewards to teachers for their special contributions to the school. Item 37 concerns the provision that refresher course activities of teachers are in accordance with the teaching goals of the school. With regards to the instructional leadership and human resource management domain, items 13, 16, and 14 were observed

Table II.
Reliability coefficients
by factor

Factor	Cronbach's α	Number of items
School climate and school improvement	0.872	11
Instructional leadership and human resource management	0.877	11
Administration and fiscal/facilities management	0.775	5
Student management	0.768	6
Professional growth and recognition of staff	0.781	6
Relations with parents and the community	0.932	7

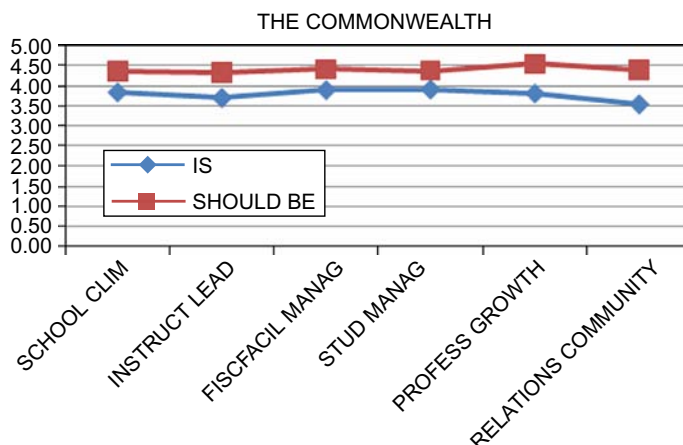


Figure 3.
Commonwealth gap
analysis by factor

to have the greatest gap scores. Item 13 concerns the monitoring of instructional and managerial processes (gap = 0.80). Moreover, item 16 (gap = 0.79) has to do with the promotion of the interconnection of learning experiences with the outside world while item 14 (gap = 0.77) with the effective integration of special programs with the regular program.

The gap analysis indicated that the principals from around the Commonwealth responding to our instrument expressed a need for improvement in additional items from the rest of the leadership domains (Figure 4). More specifically, items 9 and 8 under school climate and school improvement were found to have large gap values. Item 9 (gap = 1.10) concerns the application of research findings for school improvement, and item 8 (gap = 0.68) concerns the monitoring of the effectiveness of school improvement programs. With respect to administration and fiscal/facilities management item 23, which concerns the development of budgets, had a gap value of 0.69. Under student management, items 30 (maintenance of student folders which contain the required data to document placement in a program that deviates from regular/mainstreamed education) and 32 (provision of opportunities to students to participate actively in school

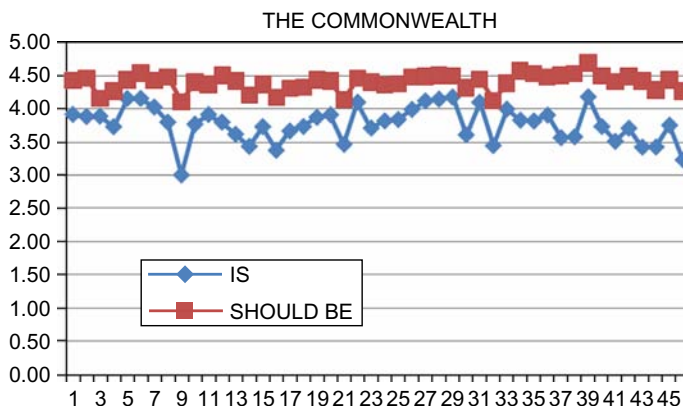


Figure 4.
Commonwealth gap
analysis by item

management issues) had a gap score of 0.70 and 0.67, respectively. In general, it seems that Commonwealth principals' needs cover a wide range of items included in all of the investigated factors.

Summarizing the main areas of needs for training

In a nutshell, it seems that the expressed needs for leadership training and improvement for school principals around the Commonwealth are highly contextualized and therefore, training should be region and country specific. We should be especially careful about decontextualizing this training. In any case, a word of caution is warranted at this point: our results should not be interpreted and discussed as if they are representative of the Commonwealth. The sampled countries and the numbers of principals participating in this study do not allow us to do that. However, the results do provide us with a strong basis on which to form opinions and interpretations such as the ones that follow.

It becomes obvious from the above analyses and discussion that there is an irreducible core for all the Commonwealth and that revolves around the areas of instructional leadership and human resource management; relations with parents and the community; and professional growth and recognition of staff. Then, there appears to be a more country and/or context specific need for training in the areas of administration and fiscal/facilities management; student management; and school climate and school improvement. Apparently, these areas are more context-dependent based on the degree and level of centralization/decentralization of the educational system of a specific country as well as on the accountability and evaluation mechanisms in place and the ability of parents to choose schools for their children. In summary, the greatest needs for leadership improvement and training are in the following three areas:

(1) *Trust building and collaboration:*

- Relations with parents and the community:
 - promotion of cooperation with other organizations and businesses from the community so that students' needs are addressed; and
 - initiation of trust building activities within the local community.

(2) *Encouraging instructional leadership and human resource development:*

- Instructional leadership and human resource management:
 - effective integration of all special programs with the regular program;
 - systematic monitoring of instructional and managerial processes to ensure that program activities are related to program outcomes;
 - promotion of the interconnection of learning experiences in the school with practices which are followed outside the school; and
 - articulation of sound recommendations relative to personnel placement, transfer, retention and dismissal.
- Professional growth and recognition of staff:
 - provision that refresher course activities of teachers are in accordance with the teaching goals of the school; and
 - provision of rewards to teachers for their special contributions to the school.

(3) *Initiating school improvement and development:*

- School climate and school improvement:
 - application of research findings to facilitate school improvement.
- Administration and fiscal/facilities management:
 - development of budgets based upon documented program needs, estimated enrolment, personnel and other fiscal needs.
- Student management:
 - provision of opportunities to students to participate actively in school management issues.

Synthesized conclusion

When preparing school leader training programmes, it should be borne in mind that all 46 items in the instrument were considered to be very important for the effective operation of the schools, since responding school leaders indicated that each one of these items should be present (with a mean of about 3.80 or more in most cases, on the scale from 1 to 5) in an effective school. Furthermore, the expressed needs for leadership training and improvement for school principals around the Commonwealth seem to be highly contextualized and therefore, training should be region and country specific. Moreover, special attention could be placed on the clusters of countries that evolved through our analyses.

Finally, more research concerning the needs of educational leaders within a specific cultural context is definitely necessary in order to prepare school leaders in the best possible way. This kind of research should be intensive, diagnostic, and developmental in nature, in order to predict the needs, and develop new approaches to educational leadership. It should also be critical and evaluative in order to place existing theories under scrutiny and extract functional ideas and practices which can become operational at the individual school level. In closing, we would argue that nobody can afford to be inactive in this important endeavour of training school leaders, because, as one teacher unionist from Barbados put it (during our on-site visitation to this country in March 2009), “one ineffective leader can destroy generations of potential good leaders”. Finally, as one of the teacher union representatives in Tanzania very eloquently put it, “not every tall black guy is a Massai”, meaning that not everyone who currently holds the position of a school principal is necessarily a school leader.

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