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**Petros Pashiardis, Vassos Savvides, Eleni Lytra and
Kakia Angelidou**

Abstract

The purpose of this article is twofold as it aims to compliment the effort of identifying the personal qualities and professional competencies generic to effective school leaders and to contribute to the comparison of effective leadership in diverse cultural contexts. Five examples of successful school principals in rural primary schools in Cyprus are described as part of the International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP). Purposive sampling was used in a multi-perspective research methodology employing a semi-structured interview protocol. The findings of the case studies formed the basis of a framework of successful leadership according to which people-centered leadership, clearly communicated values and visions, a strong emphasis on the promotion of learning, the use of networked leadership as well as the creative management of competing values are all vital constituents of a successful leadership. The implications are significant both for practitioners and for policymakers since the framework demonstrates that successful leadership is effectuated through the realization of multiple intertwined leadership domains especially with regards to the specific context of rural primary schools in Cyprus.

Keywords

administration, leadership, management, schools

Introduction

This article seeks to provide an insight into successful primary school principals in rural areas of Cyprus. More specifically, the focus has been to identify their skills, qualities, practices and values, and to make sense of their day-to-day life in order to compliment the construction of development programs for their in-service training. In this article, the educational context of Cyprus will first be presented followed by a discussion about successful school leadership findings from previous research. The findings of a multi-perspective research presenting the case studies of five primary

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public school principals in rural areas of Cyprus will then be described while the implications emanating from the case studies will be discussed.

Cypriot Educational Context

Educational administration in the Cypriot educational system is highly centralized and bureaucratic. Overall responsibility for education rests within the Ministry of Education and Culture (MOEC). The MOEC is responsible for the administration of education laws, and in cooperation with the Office of the Attorney General, the preparation of education bills. There are no local boards in charge of formulating policy or for monitoring its implementation. The MOEC also prescribes syllabi, curricula and textbooks. Appointments, secondments, transfers and discipline of the teaching personnel and the inspectorate are the responsibility of the Education Service Commission. Principals are not consulted about the appointment of personnel or in the allocation of money to their schools. Schools are also financially supported by the community and the parents' associations, which usually provide funding for the enrichment of the infrastructure or for organizing school events.

At the pre-primary, primary and secondary levels the overall responsibility for supervising the proper functioning of the schools rests with the inspectorate. The inspectorate has the responsibility for the implementation of the government's educational policies for curriculum development and for the appraisal of teaching personnel. It is also their responsibility to act as advisors and guide the teachers in improving their performance and developing professionally.

Owing to the centralized system of education in Cyprus, the main functions of principals revolve around routine administrative tasks. In fact, Cypriot principals are expected to direct and supervise deputy principals and heads of departments, and to delegate roles and responsibilities to them. Moreover, they are expected to supervise teaching staff and encourage their further professional development. They are also in a continuous cooperation with the ministry, the church, the school committee, the parents' association, the pupils' union, the counseling and careers guidance service and other welfare agencies both within and outside the Ministry of Education.

Researchers in the field of educational leadership have found very interesting views among the Cypriot principals about how they are promoted to the post (Pashiardis and Orphanou, 1999; Pashiardis and Ribbins, 2003). What is evident is that the main criterion for appointment to the principalship is the age of the candidate. Although inspector evaluations also carry a considerable weight, these improve with seniority and age and, therefore, the result is that older teachers are mainly the ones promoted to the post.

School principals receive specific support in the form of in-service training, shortly after they get promoted to their leadership post. The training programs are centrally offered by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute on an annual basis (once a week, for seven months of the school year) during school working hours. The general purpose of the programs is to provide in-service training to school principals in the areas of school leadership and school organization, and also in new trends in education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2008). This kind of training is primarily bureaucratic in nature and inadequate for the preparation of future school administrators. A recent study investigating the views of school principals in Cyprus about their professional development, revealed that they have a 'moderate' level of satisfaction from their attendance in in-service activities in general as school leaders (Michaelidou, and Pashiardis, 2009). They seem to believe that their involvement in current activities does not contribute to their professional or personal development to a high degree and does not respond to their overall needs as school leaders. These in-service programs are complemented by

postgraduate degrees in educational administration offered by the public and private universities in Cyprus.

Success of the school mission is judged mainly through the assessment of the change in the pupils' learning and behavior. This change is mainly observed by teachers and the principal during teaching or non teaching time. National standards or tests are non-existent in the Cypriot system and therefore teachers administer their own tests for assessing students. Inspection results also provide feedback as to the quality of teaching and learning. However, there is no defined measurement for documenting the quality of teaching and students' progress.

Successful Leadership

Principals' leadership is a complex, nonlinear and multilevel process (Morrison, 2002). Research suggests that contemporary principals' leadership cannot be explained through existing leadership models (for example, transformational leadership, instructional leadership). Rather principals act according to the school context as well as in response to the particular needs of the staff and students, as they race to keep up with change and innovation within the steadfast framework of their own personal core values (Day, 2003; Lazaridou, 2007). Therefore, the meaning of successful leadership must be seen in relation to the context in which people are located and the values underpinning the school as an institution in society (Dimmock, and Walker, 2000).

Research has found that successful school leaders are driven by a personal value system and are able to articulate this value system with total conviction, creating a clear sense of institutional purpose and direction (Day et al., 2000; Gold et al., 2003). Such studies demonstrate that values influence school leaders' perceptions of their leadership, the way they articulate their relationships with students and teachers as well as their aspirations and expectations of their school.

This approach placed emphasis on the moral nature of leadership in which successful principals communicate their vision to teachers, parents and students on a daily basis. The approach also assisted in the identification of the values that inform their leadership such as democracy, trust, equal opportunities, fairness, respect, love and caring for all. In this spirit, successful leaders support the engagement of others in decision making, give freedom to teachers to teach in innovative ways, encourage parental involvement in school affairs and seek to establish networks with the local community of the school.

Much of the research argues that learning is one of the primary areas of agreement between researchers who have investigated successful principal leadership and it concerns their crucial role in the creation of a learning environment for teachers and students (Hallinger, and Heck, 1998; Leithwood, and Jantzi, 2005). Indeed, recent meta-analyses demonstrated that pedagogically focused leadership has the greatest influence on student outcomes (Robinson et al., 2008, 2009). To this effect, successful principals manage to create workplace conditions that offer learning opportunities and learning experiences for the professional development of their staff as well as for the improvement of students' academic and social outcomes (Blase and Blase, 1998; Gurr et al., 2005; Jacobson et al., 2005; Moller et al., 2005). Of course, this is not easy to achieve as it requires a significant amount of time and effort. According to findings (Blasé and Blasé, 1998; Gurr et al., 2005, Youngs and King, 2002), learning-centered leaders use themselves as models of professional learning, encourage teachers to develop learning experiences in a spirit of team learning as well as support individual talents and innovative ideas. Teacher development serves the schools' organizational needs as well as teachers' personal priorities. Furthermore, the creation of a learning environment means that people trust each other, new professional knowledge is created and teacher self-efficacy is increased. Within this learning environment close relationships develop

between the principal and the teachers as well as among the teachers themselves, which makes the communication of the vision and the development of shared values easier.

The main point of teacher learning is to improve teaching. The improvement of teaching functions bi-directionally as it also improves student learning. Successful principals prioritize students' learning, and set clear goals and high expectations for students, according to the context in which they work (Gurr et al., 2003; Hallinger, and Heck, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2006). For example, a principal in a school with challenging circumstances may set different goals and have different expectations from a principal who works in a school of high socioeconomic status (SES). Indeed, successful principals care personally for their students and support, encourage and celebrate their success. Generally, they create a culture of learning in which everyone has a significant role to play.

Central to this discussion of successful leadership is the meaningful relationships of leaders with students, teachers, staff and stakeholders. Successful heads make heavy emotional investments in their relationships (Beatty, 2000; Day et al., 2000). In order to expand these relationships, principals exhibit a real interest in and compassion for students' lives and achievements, for teachers' lives and professional development and for the well-being of all stakeholders (Leithwood et al., 2006; MacBeath, 1998). They also show emotional understanding and empathy for the people around them so as to make them feel they work in a safe, respectful and caring environment.

The principals are also concerned with team harmony and group cohesion. Successful principals seek the opinions of teachers, students and parents, and strive for mutual understanding. Furthermore, they support shared decision making by involving everyone in school discussions and encouraging the staff to participate in discussions about values and beliefs. In order to distribute leadership and to follow participatory approaches to leadership, they possess democratic qualities such as being consensual, being good listeners, giving space and time to colleagues (Woods, 2005). In this sense, they establish trust in the school and increase the commitment of teachers and students to the goals required for the accomplishment of the school's vision.

Methodology

The research presented here is part of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP), which encompasses a range of case studies that consider the personal qualities and professional competencies of successful school leaders in diverse contexts through the collection of data from multiple perspectives.

Purposive sampling was used in selecting five successful principals from rural primary schools of Cyprus. Due to the fact that in Cyprus no measurable evidence of student achievement exists, no data were available to judge the success of a particular school. Therefore, the selection of the schools to be included in the research was based on the recommendations of the Inspectors of Primary Schools through their observation and their assessment of the principals. The concept of 'success' when applied to leadership constituted an attribution on the part of the Inspectorate.

A multi-case study methodology was followed in which primary data were gathered from interviews of each school's principal, teachers, students and parents employing a common, semi-structured interview protocol developed specifically for ISSPP. The principals were directly contacted by the researchers while the teachers, students and parents were mainly contacted by the principals. This is acceptable on methodological grounds since we are interested in perspectives on successful leadership. Participation in the research was on a voluntary basis. In the case of the students, a written consent form from their parents was requested as a precondition of taking part in the research. Our primary objectives were to determine whether the key stakeholders believed the principal had played

a key role in each school's success and, if so, what it was about the principal's traits, attitudes, beliefs and behavior that had encouraged the success. The use of multiple perspectives in this investigation was seen as a remedy to the limitation related to the lack of measurable criteria when assessing leadership success. In fact, our findings showed aspects of leadership that were not perceived to be successful by the respondents and which are highlighted in the rest of the article.

Secondary data were also obtained from the schools that included official school documents, communications with the MOEC as well as assessment tools developed by the principals (where applicable). The multi-perspective collection of the data proved essential in providing a rich pool of information concerning the qualities and practices employed by the principals as well as in cross-checking the validity and accuracy of the data derived from the interviews. The five cases will be presented now in order to get an understanding of some of the qualities that these successful principals seem to exhibit when exercising their leadership.

Primary School A

Primary school A is located in a small village of homogeneous population with the exception of a few immigrant workers. On the whole, the SES of the village is average. The principal of the school is a female in her early 50s. She has been principal for 5 years at this school, which is her first principalship, and has been a teacher for 35 years.

The principal did not have any further education besides her initial teacher training, but demonstrated strong commitment to teaching and a stern determination to excel. Moreover, she read widely on educational issues on her own in order to educate herself on new ideas and techniques. Thus, from early on in her career, she had a clear vision of how she would create her own exemplary school in which she would implement her own ideas. Nevertheless, when the principal began her tenure, the school was on the verge of being declared a zone of educational priority. (A zone of educational priority arises when a school has an average to low SES, a high record of school failure and frequent incidences of anti-social behavior. Additional resources are provided to this group of schools as a strategy to combat inequality.)

Upon arrival at the primary school A, the principal was confronted with a deteriorating physical environment, serious discipline problems, low levels of achievement, disempowered teachers and a hostile parents' association. In order to deal successfully with these challenging circumstances, the principal made her first priority the formation of strong interpersonal relationships with the teachers and children, which ultimately proved vital for the creation of an excellent school climate. The principal admitted considering the teachers as her 'children' and believed they viewed her as 'their friend, their mother' while the children considered the principal as a 'superwoman' and a 'proper friend'. In fact, all stakeholders seemed to view the principal as a sort of super ordinate mother figure who unconditionally supported all teachers and children through her strong and robust nature. This point is most eloquently demonstrated through the words of a parent:

If she was my principal I wouldn't be afraid of anything. I would know that whatever happens she will be a rock to support me, to stand in the front line. I believe this is what the teachers here feel and the children: trust that she will support them no matter what.

In addition, the principal supported the teachers on a practical level through her rich professional experience. All teachers were encouraged to use novel methods of active teaching while provisions were made to equip the school with electronic equipment to further assist the

teachers in the use of collaborative teaching. Furthermore, the teachers seemed to follow eagerly the principal's example of performance and hard work, creating a school culture of professional learning and commitment. The principal was well aware of the vital role she played in maintaining this culture in the school:

Everything they [teachers] do in the school, I hope it won't sound selfish, they do because I am who I am. If I leave, half of what is being done will stop because they are committed to me personally. I take but I also give.

The principal did not limit her work to the duties of an administrator nor did she emphasize her hierarchical status in the school. Instead, she considered herself to be one with the teachers and readily took on multiple roles and multiple responsibilities in the school.

Another characteristic strategy employed by the principal was the regular praise given of hard work that had a twofold effect: the high standards set were continuously emphasized and the hard work of teachers was recognized. In effect, the principal's persistence on high standards was clearly communicated to the teachers, which motivated them to work harder. Therefore, through this holistic combination of strong interpersonal relationships, support and clear communication of the school vision, the once passive and disempowered teachers were actively motivated to excel.

Further contributing to the positive school climate was the fact that the principal employed an inclusive leadership whereby authority and responsibility were distributed not only to the management team but also to the teachers and children thus enhancing commitment to the goals of the school. As the principal noted:

If you decide alone, you will be alone all the way ... If everyone co-decides together, then everyone will be willing to materialise what they have decided upon.

In an effort to increase the children's motivation, the children were also included in decision making and given responsibilities in the school to which they openly committed themselves and collectively worked towards.

The initial low levels of achievement were also addressed through specific management strategies. Specifically, the principal identified the best teachers in the school and assigned them to the lower grades. In this manner, the principal invested in strong and solid educational bases in younger children. The introduction of numerous, yet appropriate, educational programs, further increased the achievement levels of the children giving them opportunities and experiences to learn in novel and creative ways. Student disobedience was dealt with the introduction of an educational program that greatly improved the emotional and behavioral states of the children and eliminated outbursts of anger and tension. In addition, immigrant and low SES students who exhibited particularly low academic performance were supported through specific strategies. An example of one such creative strategy is given by the principal:

Fortunately every year we have a pregnant teacher so we have those extra 3 hours which are given for breast feeding. Until they are used for breast feeding we use them as reinforcement time, when possible, and thus we help children who need extra instructional time.

The holistic approach, with which the principal addressed the complex challenges of the school, was complemented with strong social networks, which she created with external stakeholders with

whom she cooperated for the daily functioning of the school. Consequently, the once deteriorating relationship of the school with the parents was restored through the personal manner in which the principal approached parents whom she did not hesitate to invite to her home. The ties with the local community were restored by the principal's consistent effort to follow the church service at the local church of the school and to attend the memorial services of the war heroes of the community on non-working days. This was greatly appreciated by the parents and the members of the community who now consider her a committed member of their community. The principal actively made use of the networks she created and readily requested the assistance of anyone who may have been of help to the school. In fact, all funds available from the parents' association, the school board and the local community were requested and exhausted to improve the school's physical environment.

Primary School B

Primary school B is located in a rural village outside but close to the capital of Cyprus. The population is generally homogeneous and of moderate SES. The principal of the school is female and in her 50s. She has been a teacher for 28 years and a principal for 3 years, two of which were spent in another school. Principalship was not something she deliberately pursued but was a progression from her choice to become a teacher arising from the seniority system of promotion in Cyprus.

When the principal began her tenure she was confronted with discipline problems characterized by frequent expressions of aggression and disobedience, low levels of achievement and low motivation exhibited by both teachers and children. The principal dealt with these challenges by combining her rich academic qualifications with the strong qualities that she possessed to formulate successful leadership strategies.

First, the principal's strong commitment and hard work were fuelled by the reciprocal interpersonal relationships that she established with all stakeholders. In fact, she considered interpersonal contact to be a vital constituent of her work and the driving force that motivated her to work hard for the good of the school. Her approachable personality facilitated her in forging a positive social environment based on cooperation and mutual respect with natural ease. She perceived her position not as a means of imposing her authority on others but instead as an opportunity to serve the needs of the school community. She exhibited individual consideration for all and proved to be caring and understanding. As she put it:

We have to pay attention even to the last child, even to the last need, of both children and colleagues. Because colleagues have needs we have to take care of as well.

Indeed, the teachers appreciated her efforts to support them and in turn, reciprocated. All teachers cooperated not only with the principal but also between themselves for the well-being of the school. As a result, all staff members felt supported in the school and by all colleagues. Moreover, the principal made considerable effort in teaching at least one lesson in each class to get to know all the children personally and to establish interpersonal relationships with them. She was indeed successful in her attempts as she easily won over the children who seemed to follow her whole heartedly. This point is particularly evident from an example provided by one of the parents:

The children want to go to church because their principal will be there. Therefore, she has managed to make children do what she wants, without demanding things from them. The children say we do what we want but in reality they do what the principal wants them to do. However, she has managed to do this without making the children feeling obligated to do so.

Apart from her strong focus on building interpersonal relations, the principal placed a great emphasis on improving the initially low levels of achievement. She developed and communicated a clear vision towards this end and implemented instructional leadership practices, such as providing feedback to teachers and praising exemplary work. The principal regularly discussed and shared ideas on innovative instructional methods with the teachers, facilitated them in exchanging classrooms and instigated them at every opportunity to seek further professional development. In effect, the principal held high expectations from the teachers and treated them as extended professionals.

The principal also established cooperative networks with external stakeholders. Her commitment and dedication to the school as well as the individualized consideration that she demonstrated towards the children was greatly appreciated by the parents and enabled her to form quality social networks with the parents and the parents' association. As one of the parents' reported:

We have a very good principal who is, at any moment, by our side. Anything we ask from her ... and anything she asks from us we are by her side.

Similarly, the principal actively involved herself in the local community and made a consistent effort to demonstrate her devotion to the community members by regularly donating blood and by attending all community events including the community church on non-working days. As the principal explained: 'By donating blood I was giving the message that I belong to their community and that I am not just a morning visitor who leaves on Fridays.'

In turn, the community council and the parents' association appreciating the principal's commitment and efforts, reciprocated by contributing to the enrichment of the school's infrastructure. The community members actively demonstrated their appreciation of the principal's work by publicly honoring her for her services only a year after she obtained her tenure.

Primary School C

Primary school C is one of two primary schools in a rural village located outside but close to the capital of Cyprus. The once small village has experienced influxes of outsiders on several occasions. After the Turkish invasion in Cyprus more than 30 years ago, many refugees resided in a government refugee settlement. In later years, due to its proximity to the capital, the village attracted many affluent residents while more recently the industrial area of the village has attracted foreign immigrants.

The principal of the school is male and in his early 50s. He has completed 3 years as a principal at this school and has been a teacher for 30 years. The principal pursued a leadership position since it was something that he had always aimed to accomplish. From the moment he became a teacher he wanted to be able to provide work of excellent standards. Therefore, he pursued higher academic qualifications specifically to prepare himself for a principalship.

The principal coped with the challenges of the school through a combination of his own personal strengths and the experience he had gained through his career and his education. Primarily, the role played by the principal's own strong and confident personality in dealing with the critical problems initially faced was evident. It was due to his resourcefulness and inner strength that the principal managed to ensure the normal functioning of the school during the 2-year building of the school site, which presented continuous unexpected challenges often dangerous for the children's safety.

Moreover, it was his confidence and stern decisiveness that enabled the principal to gain the previously nonexistent respect of the parents as well as in setting clear boundaries defining the role of the parents which were previously indistinct.

The principal's excellent social skills enabled him to form quality interpersonal relationships with the teachers and the children, which formed the base of the present-day positive school climate. In effect, all stakeholders interviewed commented on the principal's pleasant and approachable personality as well as his innate love for life and teaching. The good school climate was considered by the principal as the key component for the motivation of staff. As the principal put it:

If you wake up in the morning not wanting to go to school, it's finished. No matter what you do! Whether you bring in the best programmes, the best teachers, you will have nothing. I totally believe this.

The strong interpersonal relationships among the principal and the teachers as well as the principal's approachable personality effectively created a strong culture of cooperation in the school. As one of the teachers eloquently described:

You cannot deny him [the principal] anything because whenever we ask him for something he is there for us, next to us, he is our co-worker, so we feel that we need to live up to that. That is how I see it.

Further contributing to the good school climate is the fact that the principal employed an inclusive leadership style in which decisions were made on a collective level with all teachers. An effort was also made to include the children in decision making on issues that directly concerned their education.

Furthermore, the principal supported all his staff by providing suitable teaching materials. All teachers were encouraged to use novel methods of active teaching while suitable arrangements were made to facilitate teachers in exchanging classes and observing each other's lessons. Moreover, due to the fact that the principal greatly believed in the need of academic expertise, he always encouraged the teachers to seek further professional development. Special attention was given to weaker teachers with whom the principal designed model lessons.

In order to support the children, educational programs were introduced that addressed their emotional and behavioral problems. To this effect, a 2-year emotional health program was introduced that proved immensely successful in reducing the quantity of anger and episodes of fighting but also qualitatively improved the behavior of the children. As the principal described: 'The tension during break-time is reduced. The anger and the conflicts are reduced . . . we saw some measurable results in their attitudes, their politeness.'

The low academic achievement of children from immigrant families and of children from families of low SES was also efficiently addressed. Even though the available time to aid these two groups of children provided by the MOEC is extremely limited and the use of induction classes is not officially foreseen, through creative management, the principal was able to successfully assist their academic performance and integration. An induction class was nevertheless organized to teach immigrant students the Greek language, which permitted them to follow easily the lessons of their grades after 2 or 3 months. Children from families of low SES and low parental involvement were grouped together according to their immediate needs in order to efficiently manage the sparse time available and provide assistance to all the children in need. A constant reappraisal of the children was carried out in which children those who improved were sent back to their normal classes and other children in need took their place in order to give the best opportunities to all.

Finally, interactive networks were formed with external stakeholders. The community members and parents were actively involved with the school since they were often invited to teach the

children on issues that they had knowledge on. The school in turn organized lectures and events for the parents and community members. Moreover, the children actively contributed to the community through their participation in volunteer projects. The principal himself was also supported through his regular interactions with other principals with whom he exchanged ideas and discussed relevant school issues.

Primary School D

Primary school D is located in a small village set within a rural area outside but close to the capital of Cyprus. The moderate SES and the homogeneity of the village population have begun to change due to the recent arrival of foreign immigrant workers. Up until a few years ago, primary school D received only local children from the village. Later on, the school was made into a district school and began to accept children from a nearby village as well.

The principal is female and in her 50s and has been a teacher for 33 years, all of which were spent at village schools. This is her first principalship in which she has completed 3 years. The principal had always dreamt of becoming a teacher while, the principalship was not actively sought but resulted mainly from the seniority system of promotion in Cyprus.

The principal arrived at the school shortly after it had been made into a district school. Therefore, upon arrival at the school the principal was confronted primarily with incidences of bullying directed at the new children from the neighboring village. Moreover, parental involvement in the school was low, while relations with the local community had not been developed.

The principal confronted the challenges with a combination of her own personal strengths and the experience she gained through her rich career. Her supportive nature enabled her to approach all teachers and children with an honest consideration of their individual needs. In fact, the immediate emphasis placed on forming good interpersonal relationships proved fundamental in the establishment of the excellent school climate. The principal supported the teachers professionally but also personally and emotionally in dealing with the daily challenges of the school. Her commitment to the school emanated from her conscientiousness and innate need to offer as much as possible. Consequently, she worked hard and tried her best to address the challenges of the school. Her commitment to the school was evident. As the principal put it: 'You have to give your soul to your role and to our profession in general.'

In addition, the low profile that the principal employed proved vital in reducing the tensions in the school arising from disagreements either between teachers or with parents, which were all dealt with a calm approach. The good school climate established promoted cooperation and solidarity among the teachers who readily supported each other on school issues. The inclusive leadership style, which the principal employed, further contributed to the positive environment. Decisions were never imposed on the teachers but instead were reached collectively and in a democratic manner. Consequently, ownership of and commitment to the school goals was enhanced.

Through the active demonstration of her hard work, the principal was able to inspire the teachers and set clear high standards for them to model. The respectful interpersonal relationships made the teachers feel obligated to model the principal's performance and work towards the implementation of her vision. Consequently, a strong culture of hard work and learning was established among the teachers. This culture was transferred down to the level of the students who were actively motivated to learn, not by an emphasis on grades, but through a holistic development of their personality. The approach employed in motivating the students was clearly communicated by the principal:

It should be done by raising the child's self-image, by the joy of learning, by the act of conquering something by themselves and comparing with their own self ... The enhancement of their self-image gives them motives and functions bi-directionally.

In addition, the principal strongly endorsed the use of novel teaching practices, which she saw as an effective method to motivate children to learn. To this end, the principal actively tried to promote the further education of her staff by organizing seminars on the use of novel teaching practices but also on issues that troubled the teachers. In addition, she regularly praised the teachers for moving away from traditional teaching and for using unconventional and creative methods.

The use of 'open classrooms' was also encouraged by which teachers observed each other's lessons and then brought the main issues observed to the weekly staff meetings for constructive critical dialogue. It should be mentioned that the principal gave special attention to weaker teachers by designing model lessons with them and by actively demonstrating teaching methods to them. Moreover, networks were established with primary schools of other local villages so as to co-organize seminars for teachers.

Most of the principal's attention however, was placed on promoting interactive networks with the local communities. Community members and parents were encouraged to actively participate in the school life either by attending school organized events or through educating the children on relevant issues. For the local communities that were isolated from the stimuli of the capital, the school in effect, acted as a cultural centre where people of all ages got together for celebrations and events. As the principal described:

We never lose touch with the community. Even in events which are during non-working hours, the school is always represented. I think this makes them feel that we are with them, close to them. ... The community feels that the school is a part of it and the school feels that it is a part of the community.

Contact with the local communities had a twofold effect: (1) it promoted alternative methods of learning through the contribution of the communities' resources; (2) it proved a useful tool in assisting the acceptance of the children from the neighboring village by the student body. The bonding of the children was promoted through organized visits to the neighboring village and frequent, quality contact of the children with the members of both communities. Thus, through mutual respect building and regular contact, the racism towards these children was substantially reduced.

However, despite the success of the principal in many respects, the parents and, to a lesser degree, the teachers criticized the principal's strict adherence to the rules of the MOEC. The teachers considered that many needs of the school were delayed due to the principal's insistence on following the designated route set by the MOEC. The parents were more fervent in their criticism and considered the principal inflexible when it came to following the rules which they believed was at the expense of efficiency. As one of the parents characteristically mentioned:

She has to check everything with the Ministry's rules. Always! It is a Bible. She cannot deviate a little and make a decision.

Therefore, despite the obvious success of the principal in forging a positive school climate and a strong culture of learning in the school, she was not able to creatively manage the conflict arising from the values promoted by the MOEC and the individual needs of the school. It seems that

bending the rules for the sake of addressing the particular needs of the school is a strategy called for by stakeholders in Cyprus where schools are highly centrally governed.

Primary School E

Primary school E is set within a rural village of average size located outside but close of the capital of Cyprus. The SES of the village is moderate. The principal of the school is male and in his 50s. He has been a teacher for 33 years and a principal for 3 years, two of which were spent at a different school. Principalship was not deliberately pursued by the principal but was a natural consequence of his choice to become a teacher following the seniority system of promotion in Cyprus. The principal did not pursue further higher education since he believed that he was replete with training and seminars.

The challenges initially confronted by the principal related to the poor school physical environment, low levels of achievement and low student motivation. In addressing the challenges of the school, the principal adopted a humane approach to leadership and established good interpersonal relations with the teachers and children. In particular, he placed strong emphasis on pursuing close contact with the teachers on a daily basis on an informal and friendly manner. As one of the teachers described:

First of all, we are friends [with the principal]. He is very close to us, we will share a joke or talk about our day. He is not a strict principal shut in his office.

The approachable manner employed by the principal promoted mutual trust and respect, which undoubtedly contributed to the creation of the positive climate of cooperation. The principal did not isolate himself but instead ensured he was visible in the school. The principal's visibility promoted discipline in the school but not through fear of punishment. Instead, instances of misconduct were dealt with through dialogue and persuasion. As one of the teachers described:

On the whole, the climate is positive. There is no pressure from the principal's part and we feel comfortable in doing our job the way we think best without any extra stress.

The principal was also very supportive to the teachers where any initiatives proposed by the latter were accepted without any objection.

In congruence with the principal's approachable personality, teachers were involved in decision making where school issues were discussed openly and decisions reached collectively. The principal recognized the importance of inclusive leadership to the commitment of the teachers to the school goals. As the principal remarked: 'When decisions emerge from the teachers themselves and are not imposed on them, they are certainly more successful.'

Through the regular staff meetings but also through the close interpersonal relationship the principal established with the teachers, he was able to effectively communicate his vision for the school. Specifically, the principal recognized the low levels of achievement that characterized the school as well as the poor physical school environment. To this end, the principal clearly communicated his vision of upgrading the school building and improving student outcomes. The principal's vision for improving student outcomes successfully influenced the instructional practices of the teachers in their classes. According to a teacher:

It (the vision) determines the course of our instruction and the methodology concurrently, as well as the syllabus that we teach which is beyond the given curriculum.

In implementing the school vision the teachers were greatly supported by the principal through instructional leadership. During staff meetings, specific instructional issues which troubled the teachers were discussed while the principal gave advice and feedback to all teachers concerning their work. Particular attention was given to newly appointed teachers. In order to identify the difficulties confronted by the teachers, the principal attentively observed their performance on every occasion. One of the teachers described the principal's continuous evaluation:

If I happen to be in the staff room marking exercise books he might take a look at them and ask a question or during the extra teaching hours he might come over. . . . I believe the evaluation is continuous.

Moreover, the principal encouraged teachers to exchange visits in each others' classes in order to observe each others' lessons, to exchange teaching materials but also to seek further education through seminars. The principal's emphasis on the school vision and his consequent support to the teachers in order to facilitate the implementation of the goals set, promoted the creation of a strong organizational culture by which teachers worked collectively for the good of the school. As one of the teachers described:

This is the positive thing about our school, the human resources that form one team and try to achieve the goals set at the beginning of the school year.

Despite the successful practices promoted by the principal internally among the teachers, the principal did not manage to create successful interactive networks with the local community and the parents. On the contrary, the principal firmly maintained that the parents' involvement should be restricted to prevent them from interfering. Obviously, the principal desired to set clear boundaries defining his authority to the parents. However, the principal's attempt to define his boundaries was made at the expense of trusting and cooperative relations with the parents. The principal did not include the parents in the school life and did not attempt to make contact with the members of the local community. Consequently, the parents were left completely ignorant of the vision which the principal appropriately communicated to the internal stakeholders and naturally contended that the principal had no particular vision for the school's improvement. The principal did not manage to win over the parents, nor did he manage to demonstrate his commitment to the school and the local community since he did not attend any community events. Further, the parents were critical of the lack of any creative management on the part of the principal which would have potentially improved levels of achievement and aided the integration of immigrant students.

Conclusion

The five case studies described provided a clear insight into the dynamic and constructive manner in which principals may combine their individual qualities with efficient strategies in order to successfully deal with the challenging circumstances in the particular context of rural schools in Cyprus. On the whole, it appears that the principals followed similar patterns in the leadership of their schools.

It was obvious that the leadership of the principals of primary schools A, B and C were almost identical, while the principal of primary school D seemed to differ slightly on one particular aspect, which perhaps gave rise to the complaints from stakeholders described above. More specifically, the aforementioned principals adopted practices that promoted strong values and a school vision, focused on learning and human relationships, and built external networks of support. What

differentiated the principal of school D was a rigid stance towards rules and regulations that delayed procedures at the school. The principal of primary school E however, seemed to differ from the other principals to a much greater extent in that he failed to create constructive links with parents and the community. Moreover, the intense complaints on behalf of the parents render principal E a questionable case of successful leadership. Subsequently, we place particular emphasis on the description of the leadership strategies employed by the four successful principals while the case of the principal of primary school E will be discussed as a counter example. A framework of successful leadership is presented based on the observed patterns of individual qualities and strategies constructively utilized by the successful principals of these case studies (see Figure 1). It will be supported that a combination of all five leadership domains outlined in the framework is required for successful school leadership, particularly in Cyprus.

The first leadership domain identified refers to the use of people-centered leadership. This domain is directly related to the creation and maintenance of meaningful relationships with school stakeholders (Day et al., 2000; Kythreotis and Pashiardis, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2006). In all cases, it was clearly evident that principals gave great attention to the creation of strong interpersonal relationships between themselves and all stakeholders. All principals maintained their visibility in the school, made a point of showing individual consideration and actively demonstrated their consistent support for all. Consequently, all principals proved to be very successful in creating a good school climate based on mutual respect and cooperation with all stakeholders. In the case of the principal of school E, it seems that interpersonal relations encompassed only internal stakeholders rejecting the significant input of parents. It is apparent that the principal did not perceive the school as an open system where all stakeholders should be approached.

The second leadership domain refers to the values and vision of the principal. People-centered leadership was combined with high expectations and hard work in order to set high standards of excellence among the internal stakeholders of the school. Passion and commitment were actively demonstrated and communicated in order to promote modeling of these expectations by the students and teachers. Moreover, inclusive leadership was used in order to increase ownership of the school goals. When appropriate, effort was also made to include the children in decision making. The school vision was clearly communicated to teachers, students and parents while the teachers were actively supported by the principals in fulfilling the school's vision. Further, all principals, actively demonstrated their commitment to their schools through consistent hard work. They therefore, set high standards in the schools and effectively motivated the children and teachers to strive for excellence. This domain of successful leadership is also corroborated by previous research (Day et al., 2000; Gold et al., 2003), which advocates that successful school leaders are driven by a personal values system and communicate a clear sense of purpose and direction. In the case of the principal of school E, the values and vision inspired by him seemed to be so dim that the parents were not aware of them.

The third leadership domain concerns the promotion of practices related to learning. First, successful school leaders placed an emphasis on further education and professional development. Teachers were treated as extended professionals and were actively encouraged to seek further professional development. Moreover, the principals educated themselves constantly thus actively demonstrating the value of further education to their teachers. Student learning was promoted through the use of instructional leadership, through praise and reward while the particular needs of the children were efficiently identified and addressed. This emphasis on creating a learning environment for teachers and students is also supported by previous research (Gurr et al., 2003; Jacobson et al., 2005; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005). Therefore, while the principal of school E was satisfied with simply creating a good school climate, the other principals went a step further and

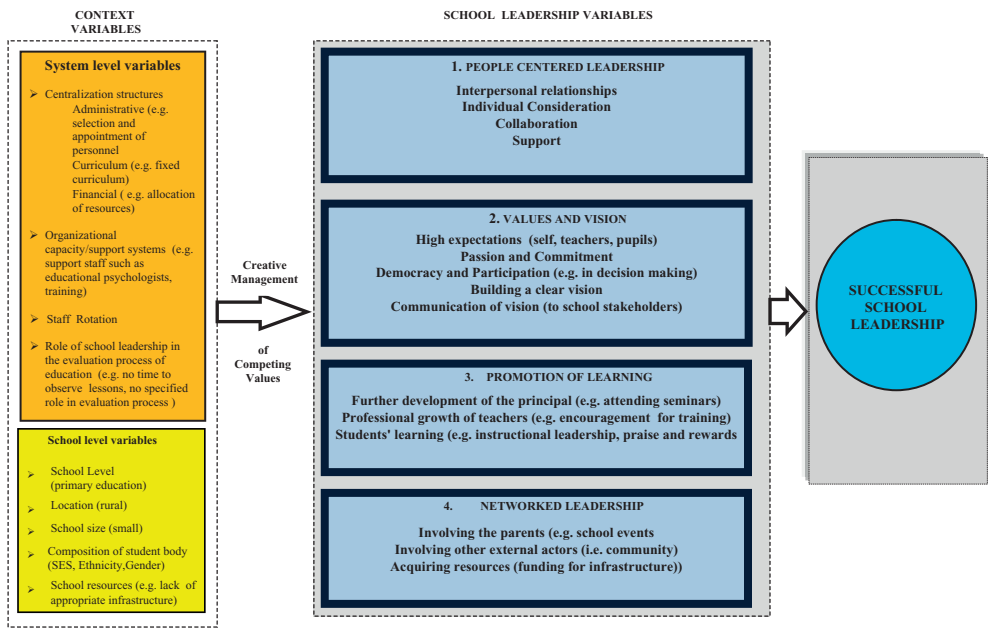


Figure 1. Domains of practice for successful school leadership

used the good school climate to instigate the teachers to model their commitment, strive for learning and need for excellence. The teachers of school E seemed satisfied with the lack of pressure to work but the parents however, were extremely critical of the lack of commitment and hard work on the part of the principal.

Moreover, it was apparent that the use of the fourth leadership domain, labeled as networked leadership, is considered essential for successful school leaders in Cyprus. It was obvious that all principals gave particular attention to the relations of the school with the local communities. All principals created interactive networks with the local communities whereby community members and parents were regularly invited to either attend or actively take part in school events. The students on their part initiated community projects demonstrating their commitment to the local communities. In addition, the principals personally made an active effort to involve themselves in the community life, which made the parents and locals feel respected. Cooperation on issues of funding for the infrastructure of the school was thus facilitated. The establishment of networks with the parents and the wider community seems to form an important element of successful principalship in the international literature (Day et al., 2000). The lack of attention on networked leadership on the part of the principal of school E was perhaps one of his main limitations as it deprived the school from the vital support of the community and left the parents feeling excluded.

Finally, from the case studies an interplay between the principals' perception of the context and their perception of the school needs was evident. Specifically, it was noted that the principals made use of creative management in dealing with the conflict created by the values promoted by the MOEC and the values held by the principals. It was apparent that the particular needs of each school were not met by the values promoted by the highly centralized educational system in Cyprus. In order to deal with the particular problems of the students in their schools, the principals

introduced specific and appropriate educational programs that proved successful in dealing with the challenges faced. In cases however, where educational programs could not be employed to deal effectively with the specific needs of the student population, the principals (in a sense) bended the rules of the ministry in order to satisfy the needs of the school. This was apparent in the case of the principal of school A, who identified the need of certain children for individualized teaching. Since the instructional hours provided by the MOEC for individualized teaching were scarce, the principal creatively found a way to effectively assist these children. Similarly, the principal of school C identified the need of immigrant children for an induction class. Even though induction classes were not foreseen by the MOEC, the principal effectively managed the sparse hours given for individualized teaching to create an induction class for the immigrant students who were in dire need of assistance. This flexibility and creativity was perhaps what was missing from the work of the principal of school D. Despite being a successful principal throughout, the parents of school D complained that the principal was inflexible and always insisted on abiding by the rules of the MOEC. Perhaps what the parents required from the principal was precisely this ability to creatively manage the conflict arising by the values promoted by the ministry and the particular needs of the school.

In conclusion, it seems that successful leadership arises not from the use of uni-dimensional strategies but instead from a multi-dimensional, dynamic combination of the aforementioned leadership aspects that were identified in these case studies. People-centered leadership and clearly communicated values and visions combined with a strong emphasis on the promotion of learning, the use of networked leadership as well as the creative management of competing values outline the elements of a comprehensive and indeed, successful kind of leadership. The implications of this leadership framework are therefore, significant both for policy makers and practitioners. The personal qualities, professional competencies and practices generic to successful school leaders may in fact form part of the courses delivered by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute and the universities of Cyprus. School leaders could also employ successful leadership practices in order to address the challenges confronted in rural primary schools in Cyprus.

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