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Cross-cultural comparative educational leadership and management:

Aligning the elements

Le leadership éducatif, cross-culturel et comparatif, et la gestion:

Alignement des éléments

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Over the last twenty years, research into school leadership has taken on a more international flavour. Before 2000, what passed as a ‘global literature’ in the area flowed mainly from North America, supplemented by work from Australia, the United Kingdom and New Zealand - forming what Sugrue (2005) labelled the “Anglo-American axis of influence.” Scholarly responses to this axis has resulted in general acknowledgement that conceptualizations of educational leadership and management need to be both broadened and deepened. As such, one of the primary drivers of research has become how to better understand the different contexts within which leaders work; and how they are influenced by, and influence this context. An important branch of this literature focuses energy on how societal culture influences school leadership across different societies. This branch of study is built upon a shared understanding, “that educational leadership is a ‘socio-cultural process’ subject to institutional and cultural norms that differ from society to society” (Hallinger & Walker, in press).

Despite encouraging growth in the knowledge base building around the importance of the culture and its influence on school leadership, there remains ahead a long and often unpaved path. Properly framed, methodologically sound and internationally accessible studies remain relatively scarce; and those that are conducted, often continue to be written, stored and disseminated in line with long-established rules dictated by a limited number of societies. For example, recent research into published papers about educational leadership written (in English) in or about 17 East-Asian countries in eight mainstream educational leadership journals between 2000-2011, showed that only six *percent* of the total number of articles (184/2910) published were from/about these countries (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013). Finer-grained analysis showed a starkly uneven distribution between the 17 societies. Hong Kong was responsible for over half of the published articles, whereas Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar did not contribute a single article (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013). If the outcomes of this analysis are anything to go by, there is much work yet to be done to establish a truly international knowledge base, much less one that allows serious comparative studies.

The papers comprising this special edition make an important foundational contribution to building understanding of school leadership across cultures. The articles are

as timely as they are important as we work to build the knowledge base. Both as individual pieces and as a focused collation, the papers add substantially to our understanding of educational leadership and management through a cross-cultural lens. The collective power of the papers moves further and goes deeper than many earlier studies in the area. They do this through adopting a number of different, yet relevant, angles covering a significant number and range of cultural contexts and by avoiding many of the pitfalls associated with researching and writing in the area (Walker, 2003).

Rather than summarizing the papers or synthesizing the many insights they provide, I have attempted to extract a set of elements that may serve to inform future studies in the area. By capturing how the papers in this special edition work together, these elements – when aligned - form a set of ‘rough’ criteria, which may help frame cross-cultural comparative studies of schools and school leadership. Whereas it is not possible here to tease out a detailed academic argument for each of the elements, they may provide a worthwhile stimulus for ongoing discussion in the area.

The building of a serious international cross-cultural comparative knowledge base calls for a number of important elements to align. The interrelated elements are listed below and then outlined in a little more detail.

- Societal cultural values and norms influence the conception and enactment of school leadership
- Societal culture does not account for everything, multiple contextual factors are also important
- Cultural comparative studies actually make important comparisons
- National boundaries and cultural configurations rarely align neatly
- Researching societal cultural values is not about stereotyping
- Societal cultures are best researched by cross-cultural groups
- Understanding the influence of societal cultures on school leadership is a cumulative process
- There is no substitute for a quality methodology
- Studies should be reported at home *and* abroad
- Be flexible - cultures shift, weave and flow, and so must the researchers

The first element holds that scholars acknowledge the influence of societal culture on how leaders think, what leaders do, and what happens in schools. While this seems patently obvious, it is an important assertion, or reassertion, to make when researching anything cross-culturally. At a surface level, what leaders do in schools looks remarkably similar. In fact, a raft of recent research has shown that principals over the world engage in the same set of core practices - such as setting direction, managing people or leading the instructional program (Day, et al., 2011). However, there are marked differences in *how* these are enacted by

leaders, depending on the context within which they work. Since leadership is essentially the enactment of values, and the cultural context is what loosely holds these values – the assertion of their place is important. Without exception, the papers in this special edition affirm the importance of societal culture and its impact on school leadership.

The second element, somewhat paradoxically, is that while scholars must acknowledge the influence of societal cultural values, they do not blindly attribute all differences to these values. Among others, economic, political, geographic religious, gender and demographic factors play a key role in the work of school leaders. This issue has been the source of considerable debate in the literature. Part of this debate plays out around definitions of culture, or finding a balance between too restrictive and too broad a definition to frame a study. While much of the work in the area has adopted an anthropological definition (Tierney, 1996), more sociological understandings also have an important story to tell (e.g. Walker & Wang, 2011). The bottom line here is to take care when interpreting the influence of cultural values on leadership and organizational behavior.

The third element is that comparative studies should actually compare different societal cultural groups, whether these are found across or within different national boundaries. This area sometimes becomes a little blurred. Are studies conducted in one site with one group – comparative? At what point does a study qualify as comparative? One position holds that that whereas studies of discrete cultural, or any other social entities are certainly valuable within their own right – it is only when they purposefully and critically compare one group or system with one or more from a different setting - that they take the comparative label.

The fourth element is that researchers do not assume that national boundaries equate to cultural configurations. For example, much has been written which assumes a finite set of “Asian” values; this denies the very different values set held societies across Asia. Through redefining boundaries as more realistic reflections of context, good cross-cultural comparative studies challenge ingrained hegemonic thinking that positions one culture as superior to another, either conceptually or even methodologically.

The fifth element is that good comparative cross-cultural studies do not use or frame cultures to ‘stereotype’ at either the macro or micro level. Even as they work with shared values and understandings to frame research, that don’t lose sight of the fact that cultures’ are at their basest comprised of individuals, and that individuals challenging shared assumption are as important in shaping cultures as are those who unconsciously conform. The sixth element is that the scholars involved in the pursuit of knowledge live and work both in and outside of the societies they study. Deeper understanding may best flow iteratively through empirically grounded discourse between scholars from ‘within’ a specific culture, and others who can provide an ‘outsider’ perspective. This is also important from a pragmatic perspective in that there is often a wealth of knowledge available written in local languages which is inaccessible to outsiders.

The seventh element is that comparative cross-cultural study is a cumulative exercise, and recognizes that the knowledge bases of different cultural settings are at very different stages of development. What seems quite basic research in one setting may not have been adequately explored in another. This is particularly so in contexts with relatively underdeveloped education research traditions and societies where certain brands of research are unacceptable. Establishing meaningful knowledge bases and building upon these in a deliberate and cumulative fashion are the key aims of cultural comparative studies.

The eighth element is that studies in the area are methodologically sound from conceptualization, to design, to implementation, to the report of findings and possible interpretation. They assiduously avoid relying on simple description or lowering standards because research in a particular setting seems unfamiliar or underdeveloped. This is not to discount that research traditions in some societies may look very different in some settings, these can certainly be tapped and combined with more dominant western approaches. Research is needed which taps an array of methods, from foundational grounded theory approaches to mining international data bases.

The ninth element is that findings are accessible internationally and, just as importantly, in the societies in which they are conducted. Whereas this may again appear obvious, it is too often the case that while studies are published in 'western' academic outlets, mainly in English, they receive little airplay in the societies where they were conducted. This can sometimes be because of political restrictions in some societies; but can be also be related to how careers are defined in more and less economically developed societies.

Finally, cross-cultural comparative researchers are aware that cultures themselves are not static entities, they shift and flow and change in response to a myriad of factors. This is both the excitement and challenge of reaching across cultures, it's hard to pin down, but well worth insights, when it works.

It has been a pleasure to read the papers comprising the special issue - they make a very welcome contribution to the field of cross-cultural comparative educational leadership, and work together well to help it gain much-needed traction. Whereas each of the papers should be read for the specific insights they offers, I have attempted to extract a number of fairly general elements from across the papers. The alignment of these elements may provide a very rudimentary guide for conducting research in the area, and for ongoing discussion.

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