

Commentary – The ISSPP expedition to a greater understanding of principalship and new challenges for tomorrow's leaders

The start of the ISSPP expedition

The International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) started in 2001 when its founder and current coordinator, Professor Christopher Day at the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom, invited fellow researchers from England, Australia (Victoria and Tasmania), Canada, Denmark, Hong Kong/China, Norway, Sweden and the USA to an initial meeting in Nottingham. At the start of the project, one important decision was to collect new empirical evidence for how successful principals were leading in schools and what success meant to them. Prerequisites and how this was done were to be studied and analysed through multi-perspective, multi-level case studies. The use of this methodology had its origins in an earlier research project in England led by Professor Day (Day *et al.*, 2000), commissioned by the National Association of Head Teachers. The group constructed protocols for interviews and observations. Since then, the number of involved researchers from various countries has grown. So has the knowledge and insights published in articles and books that build on studies connected to the ISSPP.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part traces the journey of ISSPP over the twenty-plus years of its existence. The second part summarises the articles in this special issue to find whether there is a common approach and understanding around successes and successful leadership.

We choose to characterise the work of the ISSPP as an expedition, not a journey. The reason for this is that the starting point was a genuine interest in understanding successful school leadership –both from the principals' and teachers' perspectives and from external measurements of student results, or, where these were unavailable, reputation. At the early meetings of the initial group of eight countries, we were not primarily looking for theories or models to guide our work. Instead, the discussion centred on what kind of empirical knowledge was missing about successful principalship. Initial discussions were based on, among other things, the research of Leithwood and Riehl (2003, 2005). Their descriptions of four leadership practices—setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organisation and managing the instruction programme—became a springboard for designing interview protocols and a questionnaire. At that time, Professor Kenneth Leithwood was an active member and hosted the research groups' second meeting at OISE in Toronto.

Professor Leithwood developed and explained the old findings in the article *A Review of Evidence about Equitable School Leadership* (2021, p. 3):

Including five domains of leadership practices and three categories of dispositions, the guiding framework was built on an underlying theory of human performance as a function of motivation (influenced through the *Setting Directions* domain), ability, or knowledge/skills (the focus of the *Developing People* domain) and the setting or context for performance (the *Organizational Design* domain). Successful leadership depends on positively influencing these three features of human performance among members of the organization.



This theory has been expanded with two additional domains of practice (subsumed by the *Organizational Design* domain) that are unique to educational settings. One of these domains, *Improving the Instructional Program*, reflects the well-documented claim that a considerable proportion of the school leaders' attention should be devoted to the technical core of schooling: teaching and learning. The second additional domain, *Securing Accountability*, acknowledges the broad policy context that holds most school leaders accountable for advancing their schools' achievement of widely valued student outcomes. Four types of dispositions, referred to as *Personal Leadership Resources*, are also part of this theory. These dispositions include key personal qualities of leaders themselves that enhance the chances of them enacting desirable leadership practices and enacting them well.

The first three dimensions in the citation above are valid for all organisations, but additional domains are formulated explicitly for educational settings. This is clarifying and helps to understand the role of the principals. Despite general leadership tasks, the principals will concentrate on improving teaching and learning. This is not enough, so they will also work with securing accountability to the broad policy context that holds most school leaders accountable for the advancement of their schools and student outcomes. This means that they have to build accountability measures into their leadership communication with all staff. It is leadership where they live these norms and values together with their co-workers.

Expedition purposes – finding the bridge between successful leadership and welfare

The title of the introductory chapter in the first ISSPP book edited by [Day and Leithwood \(2007\)](#) was entitled *Starting with what we know*. They framed the purpose of the book and the project in the following way:

Our project aimed to better understand what successful heads and principals do in today's demanding accountability context, a context shared *more or less* by the successful leaders we studied in eight developed countries (p. 2).

As we extended and deepened our discussions of the existing empirical research on successful principalship, we found it varied in the amount and depth of the involved countries.

The context of demanding accountability in most countries is measured in relation to students' academic knowledge as measured by international, national and local testing and, of course, the grade distribution of students with regard to the socio-economic context. One of our first challenges in the ISSPP was to select successful principals for our case studies. The first criterion for selecting case study schools was that they had improved their students' academic results over at least the previous three consecutive years under the leadership of the same principal. However, it quickly became apparent that not all countries had the same test and examination systems. We were able to accommodate differences by expanding the selection criteria:

- (1) Evidence of student *achievement beyond expectations* on state or national tests, where this evidence exists.
- (2) *Principals' exemplary reputations* in the community and/or school system. This could be gained through consultation with system personnel or other principals, school inspection reports and so forth.
- (3) Other indicators of success that are context-specific, such as *the overall reputation of the school*, awards for exemplary programmes, etc.

We discovered early that words and concepts in the English language were not easily understood or translated into different languages. Using these context-sensitive criteria, the

eight countries searched for case study schools in different settings. Some countries focused on successful principal leadership in schools in challenging areas, while others searched for best-fit schools, irrespective of social context. By using this method, we were able to look for similarities and differences regardless of social context.

The comparative aspect and the purpose were as follows:

- (1) Identify the criteria used to define successful leadership in each participating country,
- (2) Investigate and analyse the knowledge, skills and dispositions that successful school leaders use in implementing leadership practices across a range of successful primary and secondary schools in different countries and different policy and social contexts,
- (3) Identify those leadership practices that are uniquely important to large versus small schools, urban versus rural schools, schools with homogeneous versus diverse student populations and high versus low poverty schools,
- (4) Explore the relationship between leadership values, practices, broader social and school-specific conditions and student outcomes in different countries.

Before looking for evidence on the points above, we begin with the construction of the expedition protocols.

Expedition protocols

According to the ISSPP homepage (<https://www.uv.uio.no/ils/english/research/projects/isspp/>), “the origin and methodology of the ISSPP lay in an earlier study of English schools (Day *et al.*, 2000) that included

- (1) Data collected from multiple perspectives, i.e. headteachers, deputy heads, governors, parents, students, support staff and teachers.
- (2) Comparisons of effective leadership in diverse contexts ranging from small primary schools to large urban secondary schools and
- (3) Identification of personal qualities and professional competencies generic to effective school leaders.”

Before the case studies could start, a massive amount of work involved constructing our protocols. A process that has been more or less continuing at all project meetings and is still going on with revision of the protocols for the studies planned for after the pandemic in 2022.

Many may think that schools are the same all over the globe. The ISSPP has given clear insight that they vary considerably in both prerequisites and aims. Still, in each context, it is clear that some schools generate better student learning and achievement than others.

The initial aim for our case studies was that the schools were successful and had the same principal for the last 3–5 years. Each study included interviews with key actors, schoolteachers, support staff, parents, students and principals. Based on the collected data, our purpose was to explain the success story and determine the principal’s contributions to a successful result in relation to the local schools’ structure and culture.

Expedition findings on what successful leaders do in schools

A way to summarise the expedition findings of successful principalship is to look for commonalities in the articles in this special issue. We have followed the text in each article carefully and summarised the authors’ findings without citations.

Australia

The adopted systems approach depicts schools as a continuous cycle of input-transformation-output with feedback loops that inform each stage of the cycle. The inputs are the variables that lead to transformation. The transformation stage includes the actions or processes that individuals, groups and organisations engage in because of the inputs, and these lead to a range of student and school outcomes. Models are an important way to make sense of complex phenomena. A new model of successful school leadership with an open systems approach provides a different frame to consider the findings of the ISSPP and allows the ISSPP research to inform practice and connect with other school leadership views.

In the article, the authors discuss 15 different models that have been constructed to understand ISSPP data, and the last model is their contribution to a new analytic ISSPP model. It is an interesting exposé of different thinking, and the commonality between the models is the output side – the success of children and their schools.

All the models include some type of intervening space between the school leader and the students. These intervening spaces are the reason that successful school leadership is not a rational process. The intervening spaces are characterised as spaces in an organisation that affects policy understanding and goal fulfilment. An intervening space is a group of persons with the authority and responsibility to interpret policy at their level in an organisation. Such actors understand and form new policies, routines and activities to transform ideas into actions. These groups can have a formal function in the organisation or comprise informal groups in the governing chain. They can also be a prerequisite for how national policies are realised in local schools (Johansson and Årlestig, 2021).

The authors' emphasis on future research suggested using a survey instrument to test the model by modelling the connection between the elements. However, because the new model is based on the common elements of several models, the authors have a high degree of confidence that, as presented, it can add to an understanding of successful school leadership and guide practitioners in their leadership and academics in their research.

Cyprus

Based on the emerging actions from the cross-case analysis, findings across the case studies of Cyprus' schools indicate that successful school principals, both in primary and secondary education, develop external relations, as well as networking with all relevant actors; create an attitude of collaboration and shared ownership among their members and within their school organisation and finally, promote a clear vision, based on a specific number of values. This overall effort led to the articulation of specific successful actions, which could be related and compared to the results in other successful school principalship contexts. Furthermore, it could contribute to the body of cross-country comparative knowledge on successful school principalship, with different educational policies and different social contexts.

In the Cyprus description, there was a clear purpose for the successful principals to develop external relations and networking with all relevant actors by creating an attitude of collaboration and shared ownership among their members and within their school organisations. This is interesting as they recognised the importance of principals having good relations with stakeholders outside the school. The stakeholder group includes community members, as well as parents. One important aim was to communicate school visions as well as the current work. The Cyprus paper argued that school principals' abilities, such as kindness and commitment to build relationships and contacts, were important. In particular, successful school principals were described as sharing values (professional, social and political) that they endorsed and communicated with others. This is so important that external relations with stakeholders should be included in our future studies.

Israel

The explanatory successful school and principal (SSP) model comprises three cyclical phases explaining cause–effect relationships and presenting intervention points for school improvement toward success. The first phase is an organisational restructuring of two core routines: the school schedule routine and the school tracking routine, which shape and affect school staff behaviour. The second phase is the priorities and values revealed in these behaviours, which shape the school as a learning environment. The third phase in school improvement is the institutional legitimacy derived from and reflecting the school's priorities and values. All these phases are based on the principal as a crucial key player who turns the wheel. Theoretically, the SSP model explains cause–effect relationships and indicates possible interventions and improvement. Practically, the SSP model can influence principal preparation programmes, novice principal mentoring and serve as a roadmap for school improvement.

The authors of the Israel article use an explanatory SSP model in their discussion, which underlines the importance of organisational reconstruction for creating successful schools and principals. The past year with the COVID pandemic has revealed the importance of the school schedule for maintaining school-day stability, the significance of midlevel leaders working with the principal to realise the school's values and the legitimacy schools achieve by functioning under the chaos of a pandemic. We find this to be another important model to add to the ISSPP model treasure. It is important as it is direct and possible to use both for the training of new principals and for improving the work of experienced principals.

Mexico

As a result of the analysis of past research, five categories were used to describe practices and the characteristics of successful principals in Mexico. Four categories corresponded to the definition of educational quality in the country, understanding that this would be the basic criterion for evaluating successful school leadership in Mexico. The fifth category arranged information concerning the principal's perceived qualities; it is one of the most relevant studies carried out under the ISSPP protocol. The last category is of importance to understanding how principals can become successful. A model is proposed to describe the successful Mexican school principal based on the analysis done.

The authors argue that school principals who exhibit socioemotional skills could be role models for others to develop similar skills. They mean that when staff can understand and regulate emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy toward others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions, they create a school culture of continuous improvement.

For future studies, we propose highlighting the socioemotional skills of school principals, considering that this construct could generate a greater understanding of the leadership role of successful schools.

Norway

The Norwegian article aims to identify the different aspects of successful leadership. The “findings suggest multiple images of the meaning of key concepts in the project and multiple theoretical and methodological orientations. There is a need to pay more attention to methodologies to make the cases more comparable and clarify the different approaches' underlying assumptions. Successful school principalship is a complex phenomenon. Therefore, future studies of successful schools and leadership would benefit from using knowledge that draws on sociology, cultural studies, and politics.”

Early in the article, the authors describe ISSPP as a project and then point out important factors in different countries. Among these are different principal prerequisites, such as

relations between leadership and values and practices and broader social and school-specific conditions and student outcomes. They give examples of the above through the rest of the paper and links to accountability and political policy. Their conclusion is similar to the Australian article in that future studies need to have a stronger common model for interpretation and analyses. In the Norwegian case, they argue for a wider societal perspective in relation to governance, local prerequisites and theories and models from organisations and institutions outside the educational sector.

Spain

The results in the Spanish article show characteristic personality features, strategies and particular identity traits that differentiate successful and unsuccessful principals in disadvantaged contexts when they implement leadership for a learning model.

The Spanish research explores the role of school principals when they implement a leadership for social justice capable of confronting socio-economic inequalities, propose different alternatives, such as promoting a school principal who generates transformative action and a cultural change from a critical perspective, encouraging the construction of a school community.

The author argues for a leadership-for-learning model that highlights the principal's essential role in creating and maintaining the necessary conditions for student learning. According to this approach, the principal is conceived as the agent capable of creating conditions of trust, shared practice, shared vision and shared commitment, which leads to generating the school improvement capacity, as well as working directly with teachers to improve the teaching-learning programmes through a professional learning community.

Their model is general in character but can be used for important actions in different fields in relation to social justice, as shown in the article.

USA

In the USA, the first studies were done in the Buffalo area by the original group that was part of the ISSPP from its start. And as time went new project groups were created in other USA states. Research teams were organised and collected case study data using the same Buffalo protocols in Massachusetts, Texas, Indiana, Arizona and South Carolina as well as in New York City, and in some instances, teams returned to the school five years later. All the USA teams focused on successful leadership in challenging circumstances, defined as a high proportion of students with free lunch and ethnicity, i.e. majority-minority student bodies, including recent immigrant teenagers and predominantly non-white students.

The authors find that successful principals in high-needs contexts worked with setting directions and developing people around a school direction and redesigned the school organisations around collaboration. It was common that the leaders re-imagined school governance structures to build capacity for distributed leadership through teacher collaboration and leadership. The authors also report on a growing interest in notions of distributed leadership with varying forms, including leadership teams, shared governance councils and professional learning communities. These trends are likely related to increasing pressures from recent externalised evaluation policies whereby schools are assessed according to student performance on academic tests without considering the local context and prerequisites.

The authors also report on increased attention to culturally responsive leadership and increased attention to leadership identity. Across the USA cases, successful principals exhibited a passion for children and improved opportunities through education. Yet, in all cases, the leaders reached out to parents and community members, taking time to visit

students' homes and learn about their funds of knowledge, building relationships with parents as well as surrounding businesses and community organisations. The principals were conscious of their histories and were committed to learning about the school's history and surrounding community. In some cases, this required leaders to change from a deficit perception of the school as "high needs" to an asset-based perception of the school and its successes.

The authors mean that their studies display implications for future research; they argue for future studies of school leadership as a multi-level phenomenon whereby schools are studied related to districts, states and the nation. They also suggest the need for mixed methods (quantitative, longitudinal qualitative and comparative). Multi-perspectives from stakeholders could be broadened to include teachers' unions, school board members and the state school departments. We also find that USA research can help us understand the differences between successful leadership in affluent and challenging circumstances.

Expedition findings for the next challenge

What is evident after reading and summarising the country reports is that all the authors try to find a conceptual model in which they analyse empirical material that has been collected with the ISSPP protocols. The models differ, and the output side varies between focusing only on the student outcome to having a dual output side with student success and school success. Inside all the models, central, intermediate or essential factors vary when explaining why the leadership creates successful schools or students.

The way successful school principalship is explained is also interesting. There seems to be a clear connection to context and culture. In many articles, values and norms are central to the analysis, and in some cases, the link to the principals' socioemotional skills as a prerequisite for success is emphasised. Another highlighted theme is that success is connected to the way the principal understands the external environment and can create relations with different stakeholders. This connection is expressed in different ways, but it is present in almost all models used. Some of these stakeholders also form groups, or, as we would like to call them, intervening spaces that can be strong value centres that effect what leadership is possible in a school. These intervening spaces can be teacher teams resilient to change but can also be driving forces in a school and may support the principal. We have confidence in their importance and would like to see more focus on this when constructing the next analytical models (Johansson and Årlestig, 2022, in press).

After 20 years of conversation, it is clear that context and ideal differ both within and among the participating countries (Årlestig *et al.*, 2016). Our common work has helped us see the nuances and complexity of successful principalship and how principals contribute to school success. We have discussed concepts and methods, differences in academic traditions and an understanding of research.

The network has decided to go into the next phase and collect new data. That should also include an ambition to take our analyses and models to the next level. Can we see behind the differences and construct a model that helps us to compare to a higher degree the results from different countries, cultures and research topics? Can we form a model that analyses structure, culture and leadership in relation to success and goes deeper than highlighting empirical data expressed differently and with different models in each case and research group?

Theories such as systems thinking or complexity theory can help us. These theories find their seed from a belief that events in today's world are highly interdependent. They reject linear, atomised and predictive explanations of the social world, which is necessary in a constantly changing society.

These two theories have no clear description of different connections between the variables or factors we use in the network. This is another argument for a thorough discussion of how the ISSPP based on a common protocol should combine and explain the data we collect.

Our 20 years of expedition into studies and networking has been crucial to take us to what we know and where we are now. A common analysing tool or model could help to take us to new grounds, especially when our future focus, according to the ISSPP homepage, has the underlying rationale that

- (1) Successful schools are dynamic, policy influenced but not directed, task driven and relational in their nature.
- (2) Success goes beyond the *function*, *personality* or *style* of particular principals.
- (3) Success is achieved through the “layering” of values, beliefs, strategies, actions and relationships over time that, in combination, directly and indirectly, lead to sustained achievement.
- (4) Successful principals are agential, rather than compliant, influential through how they think and feel, who they are, what they do and how and when they do it.

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