School leadership and equity: An international comparative study

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Synopsis

We know that there are great movements of people taking place around the world. Our societies are becoming more diverse and multiethnic in nature, especially in the urban environments of the larger cities. However, we also know that schools still represent the ‘status quo’ and that most principals (head teachers) are from the ‘majority’ culture. Curricula tend to represent and promote the values and beliefs of the majority culture, and the very constructs of school – timetables, policies, assessment methods, physical design, and so forth – are often quite foreign to the minority student. There is little empirical evidence describing how schools are responding to these changing demographics.

In this paper I intended to present the preliminary findings from the Canadian phase of an international pilot study that is collecting and analyzing data from fourteen different countries. This limited qualitative pilot study will seek to identify emergent themes that might form the basis of a larger international quantitative study.
The research team

The researchers involved in this study represent fourteen countries. I am pleased to recognize them here:

Sarie J. Berkhout, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

J. Tim Goddard, University of Calgary, Canada (Principal Investigator)

Olof Johansson, Umea University, Sweden

Yvonne Leeman, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

Paul Mahieu, University of Antwerp, Belgium

Betty Merchant, University of Texas at San Antonio, USA

Dieter Poschardt, Friedrich Alexander University Nürnberg, Germany

Geoffrey Riordan, University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Jan Robertson, University of Waikato, New Zealand

Anna Saiti, Harokopio University, Greece

Macarena Lucero Schmidt, Universidad del Salvador, Argentina

Ian Stronach, Manchester Metropolitan University, England

Anita Trnavčevič, University of Primorska, Slovenia

Gunn Vedøy, Hedmark University College, Norway
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In the Canadian phase, which is being conducted in Calgary, Alberta, interviews are being conducted with principals from four schools. Each is a public school in an urban environment, part of the compulsory education system (serving children aged 5 -16), and identified as having an ethnoculturally diverse student population. Three are elementary (primary) schools and one is a junior high school. Three schools are on the regular school calendar; one of the elementary schools is on a modified year calendar. Unfortunately, access to schools was denied during June and September, and so interviews will only take place this month.

The research question guiding this study is: In what ways do principals facilitate access to schools for all children? I shall use the opportunity provided by this meeting to present the overarching framework of the study, and to describe some of the themes that we anticipate will be important. Specifically, I shall comment on matters such as avoidance and inclusion strategies, school policies, and the recognition of difference.

Method

The study is utilizing qualitative methods. Specifically, the researchers are:

- Conducting semi-structured interviews with the principal;
- Observing the school;
- Collecting and analyzing relevant policy documents (e.g., school, educational jurisdiction, and provincial / state / nation regulations); and,
- Conducting individual and/or focus group interviews with students, teachers and/or parents.
Observational data

In visits to the schools, the researchers are collecting the following observational data:

- Descriptions of the area served by the school (local context, economic activity, cultural identity, and so forth);
- The gender, age (approximate), and cultural affiliation (majority / minority) of the principal and teachers;
- The extent to which minority culture students are visible in the school;
- The cultural groups who are represented, and the degree to which they seem to mix well together or to stay in ethnic groups; and,
- Descriptions of the cultural artifacts that are present in the school - e.g., type of music playing over speakers, trophies in cabinets, murals and artwork, entrance to grounds, signs to visitors (language), cultural affiliation of teachers, etc.

Documentation

Each country has different policies and procedures in place. A review of these will form part of literature review; realistically, this must be part of the responsibility of the in-country researcher. Therefore, the role of the in-country researcher is two fold: a) to gather empirical data and comment of principals’ approaches, describing the policy in action; and, b) to describe the official national, state, and local jurisdictional policies and approaches, as applicable, along with any statistical demographic data.

Interview protocol

As this is an international comparative study, some questions may not be relevant to all situations. The researchers will instruct participants as follows: “Please answer these
questions as best as you can. The questions are meant to be ‘guidelines for discussion’, so please add any other comments you think are relevant and useful to this study.”

*Ethical approval*

Each researcher was responsible for acquiring the necessary ethics approval from their institution and the jurisdiction(s) in which the data are collected. It is important to note that this study has NOT received external funding. In this initial and exploratory phase, each individual researcher is expected to meet the costs of collecting the data from the schools in their country, conducting the local (national) analyses, and forwarding the results of that analysis to me. I have been supported by the University of Calgary and will meet the costs of conducting the comparative analyses of the data, and of preparing the draft research report.

**The Western Canadian context**

According to data collected as part of the 2001 national census, 18 per cent of the total Canadian population were new immigrants and a further three per cent claimed Aboriginal identity (Canada Heritage, 2003). Canada receives, on average, 225,000 new immigrants of all ages each year, with the majority relocating to urban centres (Qadeer, 2003). The province of Alberta receives approximately 15,000 new immigrants on an annual basis, with 61 per cent of these newcomers choosing Calgary as their home. The changing profile of the immigrant population has shifted dramatically over the past twenty years. In 2002, 57 per cent of the newcomers in Alberta arrived from ten source countries; the majority originating from India, China and Philippines. Eight of these ten countries do not have
English as an official language, resulting in 48 per cent of the new immigrants arriving with no previous knowledge of English (Alberta Learning, 2003).

In 2002, some 49.2 per cent of the new immigrants to Calgary knew neither French nor English, the two official languages of Canada (Coalition for Equal Access to Education, 2003, p. 5). This situation is not unique to Canada. In Antwerp, 80 per cent of the students in the inner city come from a background that is described as ‘foreign’, i.e., not Belgian (Paul Mahieu, Personal Communication, April 19, 2004). There are some schools in New Zealand where 95 per cent of the children are Maori or Pacific Islander (Ann Milne, Personal Communication, July 12, 2004). And yet the curriculum, the pedagogy, and the organization and governance of schools are drawn from and grounded in the dominant culture of each country.

In all three countries, and in many others, policy makers and pundits vent about the low success rates of minority and marginalized populations. This is particularly the case for indigenous populations. In Australia, “a much higher proportion of Aborigines are in the under-15 age group and hence in the compulsory school phase, yet levels of educational achievement are much lower – only 13.6 per cent of Aborigines possess a post-school qualification (compared with 34 per cent of other groups)” (Foskett & Lumby, 2003, p. 5). In Canada,

Aboriginal Peoples were over represented in correctional institutions relative to their population. ... Aboriginal Peoples accounted for 74% of admissions to custody in Saskatchewan, almost seven times their share of the province's population. Aboriginal Peoples also accounted for 65% of admissions in the Yukon, over three
times their share of the territory's population, and 39% of admissions in Alberta, almost eight times their share of the population in that province. (Statistics Canada, 1998)

In New Zealand, 40 per cent (2 out of 5) of the students suspended from school between 1992 and 1997 were Maori, and yet Maori students only made up 20 per cent of the total student population (Macfarlane, 2004).

New immigrant populations are also at risk. In a landmark Albertan study, Watt and Roessingh (2001) found that 74 per cent of those students for whom English was a second language dropped out of school, a figure “derived by calculating the number of students registered in Grades 10-12 who withdraw without having fulfilled the requirements for graduation from high school”. This compares to the generally accepted high school dropout rate of 30-35 per cent. It is apparent that ethnocultural minority populations in many western countries, whether indigenous or immigrant, are not being well served by the current education system.

As the literature confirms, the “social, economic, and demographic changes taking place in Canadian society have placed tremendous amount of pressure on educational systems to respond to the accompanying growth in the diversity of student enrollment” (Anisef & Kilbride, 2004, p. 10). As the key administrators at the school level, principals must take the lead role in meeting the demands of these social, economic, and demographic changes. Principals exhibit varying degrees of success in providing leadership required to adapt to the pluralistic society.
The changing demographics that result from global population movements have a significant effect on the design and delivery of public education systems, as different ethnocultural groups have different perceptions and understandings of the role and purpose of schooling. Education in Canada is a provincial responsibility and, as a result, the points of dissonance that arise from these value conflicts must be addressed at the provincial level.

In Alberta, as in most western jurisdictions, schools still represent the ‘status quo’ and dissonance exists because most educational administrators are representative of the ‘majority culture’ group within that specific society. Further dissonance develops as the curricula and pedagogy used in the schools tend to represent and promote the values and beliefs of the majority culture and are seldom reflective of the plurality of students. This dissonance is exacerbated by the contemporary focus on accountability, a concept that in Alberta tends to be somewhat narrowly defined as individual student achievement on standardized provincial examinations.

Concurrently the focus on accountability found in Alberta reflects a trend common to many jurisdictions. As a public good, education is seen as a product of public expenditure – indeed, education consumes more than half of the total provincial budget. In 2002-2003, public education funding in the province “was $4.8 billion, with $3.5 billion going to the Kindergarten to Grade 12 system” (Goddard, James, Glickman, Hébert, Gauthier & Neary, 2003, p. 3). Accountability is made manifest in a number of ways, with a “focus on ensuring system and fiscal accountability” and an “emphasis on the achievement of results” (Alberta Learning, 2003b, p. 6). Indeed, the most public manifestation of
accountability in education is through the regular administration of standardization examinations to pupils, the ranking of schools based on the results of those examinations, and the subsequent publication of school rankings in the media.

School administrators are under great pressure to improve the ranking of their schools. This pressure comes not only from the educational establishment but also from the public, particularly those who are swayed to equate competitiveness with citizenship. The focus on educational achievement, narrowly defined, runs counter to the task of meeting the needs of an ethnoculturally diverse population. Educational leaders need to explore some of the interactions between a leadership focus on individual achievement (as measured by standardized examinations) and a focus on the collective integration of minority and marginalized populations in to society.

**Related literature**

One of the factors influencing the ability of principals to respond to diversity is the lack of representation of principals and teachers from minority cultures in the Canadian school system. It is accepted that “the lived experience of principals, regardless of race or origin, will shape their perceptions, attitudes and behaviors, as with teachers and others in the school system” (Carr, 1997, p. 5). It would appear useful, in these circumstances, to have an ethnoculturally heterogeneous body of school administrators. Indeed, nearly all of the principals surveyed by Carr agreed that *given equal qualifications* [emphasis added], the recruitment, hiring and retaining of minority teachers and principals would provide much needed role models for minority students and teachers, and bring a broadened perspective
into the system. The difficulties experienced by minority teachers in obtaining “equal qualifications” was not addressed.

Although many schools now recognize ethnocultural diversity and make efforts to prevent discrimination against and among pupils, there continue to be inequities in terms of potential achievement for minority students. Anisef and Kilbride (2004) assert that visible minority youth “will continue to be at risk unless the system as a whole is actively working to accommodate differences and needs” (p. 10). A number of underlying barriers are cited, including “lack of supportive school policies, discriminatory attitude of teachers, and the organizational structure of schools to which the newcomer has difficulty adjusting” (p. 10). Lam (1994, cited in Anisef & Kilbride, 2004, p. 11) describes the need to focus beyond finding ways for immigrants to fit into the system, to one where it is questioned as to “why and how the education system fails to meet their needs. The problems facing youth are rooted in socio-economic inequality and different forms of institutional and systemic discrimination.” This recognition of cultural and structural challenges can be overwhelming for the administrator.

Carr (1997) concluded that there is a need for “greater and relevant training in relation to understanding and implementing equity initiatives and policies in education. The need for greater sensitization and diversity must, therefore, become a priority for reforming the position of the principal” (p. 5). Through the articulation and sharing of their experiences in the management of equity issues within their own cultural context, school administrators will have the opportunity to contribute to a greater understanding of the systemic issues of diversity and equity. Such a discourse will highlight the potential and challenges in the
development of supportive policies, and the responses of teachers, students, and parents, to the strategies that principals use to create a more inclusive, equitable and responsive school culture. Specifically, educational administrators might explore matters such as: school policies, recognition of differences, inclusion strategies, and avoidance strategies.

**School policies**

School policies are key in supporting the principal’s efforts to facilitate equal access to all students within the school environment. The *Guidelines for Recognizing Diversity and Promoting Respect* (Alberta Learning, 2000) outline criteria related to the program, criteria that are designed to ensure equitable access for all students. Policies of this nature promote the monitoring and development of supporting materials and learning resources that are inclusive and representative of the population. These policies also provide support for the principal to implement programs designed specifically to accommodate the diverse needs of the students. Heritage language programs, diverse hiring practices, early literacy and commitment to English as a Second Language (ESL), and a culturally balanced curriculum are indicative of supportive policies for equal access. Further study is required to identify which of these policies exist, to determine the extent to which such policies are followed, and to define their relative merits and challenges.

**Recognition of Differences**

It is recognized that schools have become learning centres for a diverse population of students and teachers (Woodrum, 2002). If principals are going to effectively lead ethnoculturally diverse schools, without marginalizing or alienating important parts of the school community, then they need to be taught about cultural values and how these
influence people's expectations. Understanding school culture and the impact on school leadership is key to this process. Hallinger and Leithwood (1998) contend “that the management of people and organizations is a socially constructed process. Societal culture influences the values and norms that shape human behavior. It follows that the management of people will vary across cultures” (p. 9). Describing how the principal and staff at an inner city Canadian prairie school responded to student needs by making their school more intentionally inviting, Barton and Ward (2002) provide an illustration of the educational leader’s adaptation to the cultural context. The school gradually began to reflect the surrounding community by incorporating the First Nations (Native American) culture of many of its students. With cultural awareness and an appreciation of differences, the principal moved beyond a climate of tolerance to one where the potential of diversity is recognized and shared.

**Inclusion strategies**

The leadership role of the principal in a multicultural society requires strategies of inclusion to create a culture of equal access for all children. These efforts are reflected in school leadership that recognizes differences in values, encourages staff development, and focuses on the recruitment and retaining of minority teachers. Principals encourage teachers to differentiate their teaching practices to support more inclusive classrooms. To do this school administrators ought to implement strategies such as democratic governance, a culture of collaboration, a commitment to professional growth, strong leadership, and concern about the equity, success, and well-being of individual students.
Together, such strategies can contribute to the transformation of school culture and the implementation of inclusive education (Kilgore, Griffin, Sindelar, & Webb, 2002).

**Avoidance strategies**

Principals can use avoidance strategies to minimize differences with the intention of creating equitable access and opportunity for all students. The lack of attention to ethnocultural difference, however, can create a situation where an ideology of “racelessness” that suggests that only students who adjust to the dominant culture will be successful becomes dominant (Penny et al., 1993, p. 432). An assumption of shared orientation results in a well-intentioned leader avoiding dealing with the inherent cultural differences and diverse needs of the students, resulting in misunderstanding and isolation.

**Conclusion**

This paper has introduced an international pilot study that is examining the consequences of policy implementation on access and success of minority children in schools. This 14 nation study will provide empirical evidence to support the contention that school administrators, in implementing local and jurisdictional policies, may inadvertently be denying full participation in education to children from minority and marginalized communities. The findings will provide policy makers, practitioners, and researchers with the data necessary to inform their future work.
References


Calgary, AB: Author.


