Gateways to Leading Learning

International Perspectives on Urban School Leadership

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We are pleased to introduce this new series of monographs as part of the ongoing collaboration between the Asia Pacific Centre of Leadership and Change (APCLC) and the newly established Hong Kong Principals’ Institute (HKPI). Both organizations are focused on promoting deeper understanding of school leadership through innovative research and to improved leadership practice in schools. We believe that working partnerships between organizations such as ours provide fertile tracts within which ways to more successful leadership can be explored, tested, practiced and disseminated in ways that neither partner can achieve individually.

We hope that you enjoy reading the monograph and that it in some way helps you reflect on what you do as a leader, regardless of where that is.

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International Perspectives on Urban School Leadership
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Abstract

This monograph focuses on educational leadership in urban schools in a broad range of international contexts and highlights findings from the International School Leadership Development Network, an international collaborative research project sponsored by the British Educational Leadership Management and Administration Society (BELMAS) and the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA).

The authors begin by describing how global discourses are dominating the field of education, particularly at the school or campus level. The context of urban education is then examined, including promising ways urban school leaders are attempting to tackle the persistent problems facing their school systems. Next, research findings are presented from ISLDN team members who are exploring two interrelated topics germane to urban schools -- leadership for social justice and leadership in high-needs schools. The authors explore how school leaders in different international settings strive to overcome economic and social disadvantages by examining the interface between macro-level policies and leadership practices at the institutional level. The monograph concludes by discussing the lessons that can be learned from international comparisons about urban leadership and examining the implications for preparing and developing leaders for urban schools.
Urban school systems around the world serve economically-disadvantaged communities that are plagued with inequitable resources and experience high teacher and student mobility. As a result, urban school systems, their teachers, and leaders face enormous challenges not experienced to the same degree as their suburban and rural counterparts. Moreover, a particular feature of urban schools is the way in which questions of race and social class collide (Halford, 1996), layering additional complexity on already complex problems. Beyond the social and economic effects of poverty, there is the wide-spread misconception that children and adolescents living in poverty cannot be held to the same academic and social expectations as students from more affluent neighborhoods. The biggest danger of this type of “deficit thinking” is that students are viewed as being helpless and hopeless, with little chance of succeeding in the classroom, workforce, or society.
Often, these dismal expectations lead students and families to feel isolated, neglected, and alienated within their local communities.

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Next, research findings will be examined from ISLDN team members who are exploring two interrelated topics germane to urban schools -- leadership for social justice and leadership in high-needs schools. By focusing on school leaders who seek to overcome economic and social disadvantage and challenge social injustice, the monograph explores how these issues are framed in a variety of different national contexts. In particular, the interface between macro-level policies and leadership practices at the institutional level are examined. We conclude by discussing the lessons that can be learned from international comparisons about urban leadership and examining the implications for preparing and developing leaders for urban schools.
Global Discourse in Education

As practitioners and scholars have sought to understand the challenges facing school leaders in urban contexts, they have begun to recognize the actions and experiences of school leaders in urban communities take place in a globalized context. As Stevenson and Tooms (2010) have argued, what happens “down here” cannot be disconnected from “up there”. The challenge not only is to understand how global discourses frame local contexts, but also to realize how such contexts are mediated by myriad national, regional, and community factors that ensure that local contexts are unique and highly conditional (Pashiardis, 2008).

Research is beginning to identify how cultural and social factors affect educational leaders, especially those working in urban school settings where instructional and school improvement is emphasized (Walker, Hu, & Qian, 2012). For example, many Asian cultures tend to emphasize harmony and strong hierarchical power differences between school administrators and teachers. As a result, principals are less inclined to observe classroom teaching practices and suggest instructional improvements for teachers (Lee & Hallinger, 2012; Pan, 2012). Compounding this situation, many teachers have heavy teaching loads, making it difficult for principals to find time to engage in meaningful discussions about instructional practices (Pan, 2012). In addition, Arab cultural norms, which emphasize social hierarchies and control, strongly affect how principals interact with teachers (Arar, forthcoming). Because Arab societies tend not to accept women in formal leadership roles, female principals evaluating male teachers find it difficult to provide constructive feedback to male teachers. Furthermore, powerful families (called hamullas) in the community can overrule principals’ decisions about teachers’ performance reviews and/or dismissal. Consequently, Arab principals may have to compromise their values and decisions when working with underperforming teachers.
Finally, Lee and Hallinger’s (2012) study of principals in different societies underscores important ways in which national-level context influence principals’ time use and responsibilities. Using international-comparative data from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007), they discovered a number of trends based on the economic development of the country, the hierarchical power differential between leaders and subordinates, and standardization of the curriculum. Their analysis revealed:

1. Principals from developed countries spent more time at school, but less time dealing with curriculum and instruction, than school leaders from developing countries,

2. Principals working in countries with high power differentials allocated less time to curriculum and instructional development than school leaders in societies with lower power differentials,

3. Principals in less hierarchical societies spent more time with community members and parents than those in more hierarchical societies, and

4. Principals employed in schools systems with greater curriculum standardization spent less time on administration than principals where standardization was not as prevalent. These findings suggest that the ways in which principals enact their roles are strongly influenced by their social and national contexts, perhaps more so than school-level factors.
Regardless of whether globalization is defined in economic, political, or cultural terms (Olssen, Codd, & O’Neill, 2004), the concentration of power in globalized networks and institutions becomes evident, increasingly so in the educational arena. Institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, have had a substantial influence on education policy (Robertson & Dale, 2009). Hence, the globalization of education experienced in the form of the flow of discourses and policies across national borders has probably never been more pronounced. These pressures appear to intensify as economic success becomes more closely linked to educational achievement; therefore, globalized economic competition becomes intimately linked to globalized education competition. The best examples are the heightened awareness of differences in educational outcomes reflected in the PIRLS, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) reports. As a result of these international comparative league tables of educational performance, globalized policy discourses that promise rising standards and reforms have increased (Hallinger, 2011; Walker & Dimmock, 2002; Walker, Hu, & Qian, 2012). As illustrated in the previously-mentioned studies (e.g., Arar, forthcoming; Lee & Hallinger, 2012; Pan, 2012), nation states remain an enduring feature within the context of global governance. Because individual nation states retain considerable power and independence, there continues to be substantial diversity in the face of what is sometimes presented as global homogeneity (Held & McGrew, 2007). Oftentimes, localized cultural traditions within nations reinforce the sense of difference and diversity. Therefore, there is a pressing need to understand how local experiences are shaped by global and national discourses, but this must also reflect how those working in individual institutions are able to assert their independence and agency at the local level (Pashiardis, 2008). These factors underscore the importance of increasing our understanding of how global and local context shape the practices of school leaders. To better understand the context of urban school leadership, we turn our attention to these schools and the particular difficulties they encounter.
The problems facing urban schools are monumental. On one hand, various structural challenges pose significant problems for school systems. For instance, students in urban schools tend to have low achievement scores, recurring health problems, high teenage pregnancy rates, low secondary school graduation rates, high absenteeism and disciplinary problems, and high unemployment upon leaving school (Abram et al, n.d.; National Center for Education Statistic, 1996). In addition, the educational infrastructure of urban education can be problematic. In comparison to other schools, many urban systems are plagued by incoherent instructional practices, inadequate data management systems and resources, decaying buildings, large student enrollments, and difficulty hiring and retaining high-quality teachers.

On the other hand, cultural challenges compound the problems facing urban school educators. As noted earlier, deficit thinking reinforces the notion that urban students are incapable of learning academic content and social skills. In many instances, educators believe the prevailing norms in urban communities and households impede their efforts to educate their children. They sense parents not only are less likely to support the school’s efforts to educate their children, but they also are not motivated to provide assistance at home (O’Conner & Fernandez, 2006). Many of these beliefs are rooted in negative stereotypes about race and class, leading teachers and administrators to unwittingly perceive that these students have learning deficiencies as well as behavioral and emotional problems. If urban educators do not have an “asset-based” view of students and communities, then their students may not see curriculum and instructional practices as being culturally responsive or relevant, resulting in mistrust, disengagement, and rebellion (Steele, 2010). A prominent example of an “asset” perspective is illustrated in the guiding principles of the National Institute for Urban School Improvement (2004-2005), which state that urban schools should value the knowledge and experience of children and families, use community resources, produce high-achieving students, and provide an education based on care and respect.
To typecast all urban education systems, teachers, and administrators as insensitive and non-responsive to the educational and emotional needs of their students would be a great mistake. For example, a host of major reform efforts have been launched in the United States to improve and strengthen high-poverty urban schools, including the Coalition of Essential Schools (Brown University), School Development Project (Yale University), Institute for Urban School Improvement (University of Connecticut), and National Institute for Urban School Improvement (Arizona State University). In addition, governmental policies, such as Getting It Right for Every Child in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2012), and massive efforts to direct resources to disadvantaged schools in China (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2005), have attempted to integrate services for children regardless of their social and economic standing. Furthermore, leaders who have achieved success in high-poverty schools have an unwavering belief in students’ learning capabilities, maximize instruction time, develop the problem-solving capacities of their teachers, and use empirical evidence to monitor results (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013). Other promising examples include restructuring school governance to foster greater local community involvement and ownership; reducing the size of schools and classrooms to personalize the schooling experience; and revising professional development to be teacher-directed, site-based, and collaborative (Halford, 1996).

Research and development in school leadership also acknowledges the importance of leading schools experiencing high poverty, low student achievement, and inadequate resources and facilities. Two prominent areas have captured the attention of researchers and practitioners: (a) social justice and (b) high-need schools, which are examined below.
A growing body of work focuses on social justice, which examines the equitable distribution of resources and the elimination of marginalization and exploitation (Woods, 2005). Cribb and Gerwitz’s (2003) conceptualization of social justice captures the range of issues leaders can attend to: (a) *distributive justice* examines how social and economic resources are distributed and withheld from certain socio-economic groups, (b) *cultural justice* refers to how certain cultures dominate others, leading to disrespect, exploitation, and non-recognition, and (c) *associational justice* is concerned with how groups and individuals are prevented from participating in the decision-making process. Another depiction of social justice is advanced by Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002), who claim it is “actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions” (p. 162).

School leaders are being urged to become social justice advocates, particularly in urban settings where resources are scarce and local citizens and communities have little power or influence regarding their social, economic, and educational standing (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). Theoharis (2007) defines principals who openly confront issues of race, class, gender, disability, and sexual orientation as being social justice advocates. Principals who tackle these issues are adamant about raising student achievement for marginalized students, eliminating school structures that segregate students, enhancing teachers’ capacities to work successfully with high-need learners, and strengthening the school culture to be more inviting to marginalized groups and individuals (Theoharis, 2007).
Leadership in HIGH-NEED SCHOOLS

Accountability trends in multiple international contexts have begun to focus on schools that have unique student and community characteristics and low student performance (Duke, 2012b; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010). These so-called “high-need schools” mirror many of the characteristics associated with urban schools. High-need schools tend to have:

- High levels of ethnic minorities, immigrants, mobility, homeless families, children in foster care, incarcerated students, drug abuse, and English Language Learners (ELLs);
- Large percentages of students not achieving expected levels of achievement;
- High numbers of student truancies, suspensions, and dropouts coupled with low attendance and graduation rates; and
- Significant problems with the learning environment, including high teacher and leader turnover, high teacher absenteeism, low staff morale, and financial problems (Duke, 2008, 2012b).

In the 1990s, efforts to improve high-need, low-performing schools spawned the school turnaround movement (Duke, 2012b). Although there are few empirical studies of turnaround leadership, preliminary results highlighting how these leaders attempt to alleviate their schools’ low performance are emerging. Oftentimes, these leaders challenge the status quo, demand teachers embrace the school’s new direction, or force them to find employment elsewhere (Hollar, 2004). Principals and teachers in turnaround schools understand the need to improve literacy programs, increase parental involvement, provide timely data on student progress, focus interventions on low-achieving students, and develop new approaches to school discipline (Duke, 2008). Finally, because turnaround schools need “swift and immediate action,” school leaders have tended to direct their initial focus on literacy programs, daily schedules, targeted staff development, and teacher teams responsible for data analysis and curriculum alignment (Duke, 2008).
One of the effects of globalizing educational policies and practices is the formation of regional and international networks of nations, non-governmental organizations, and multinational companies (Pashiardis, 2008). The field of educational leadership preparation and development also is becoming more engaged in international collaboration (Lumby, Crow, & Pashiardis, 2008); however, creating these networks poses substantial challenges, including the tendency for pro-Western views to dominate projects and the lack of financial and organizational support (Brown & Conrad, 2007; Walker & Dimmock, 2000). To counteract these problems, Walker and Townsend (2010) have discovered successful cross-national partnerships: (a) congregate a small group of “like-minded energetic people” who are able to locate funding, create a vision, and establish political support, (b) rely on linkages with existing professional networks, (c) embrace and encourage diversity and differences, (d) establish high-profile events in different locations, and (e) promote activities, events, and products that support colleagues from different countries who otherwise would not be able to participate.

Guided by these principles of effective cross-national partnerships, in 2010 UCEA and BELMAS launched an international comparative study examining the preparation and development of school leaders, referred to as the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN). Two research strands of the ISLDN have emerged: (1) leadership for social justice and (b) leadership in high-need, low-performing schools. Although the research sites comprising these studies were not exclusively in urban settings, the challenges these principals encountered reflect many of the same issues urban school leaders confront on a day-to-day basis. A description of the work being done in each of these strands is summarized in the following pages.
As mentioned earlier, the concept of social justice leadership has become increasingly popular; however, there is substantial variation in the meaning of the term. It has been used by those who reflect a broad range of philosophical and political traditions. For the ISLDN group focusing on “social justice leadership” this inevitably posed an early problem: How could we identify “social justice leaders” without first reaching agreement about what we meant by “social justice”? This generated considerable debate, as might be expected. Of particular note was the assertion that the term “social justice” as an identifier or descriptor had little or no meaning in some cultural contexts.

It is important to recognize, therefore, that the term itself reflects particular views of the world, and this in turn can reinforce various power relations regarding how problems are framed, and by whom. This is an issue the group continues to be aware of, and to reflect on.
The group decided that its research approach was to be essentially inductive, in which the voices of principals would be the key focus. Although team members recognized the importance of viewing school leadership more widely, for largely pragmatic reasons, the focus has been on the principalship. Beyond this, social justice leaders were identified in two ways in order to be deliberately broad and inclusive. First, social justice school leaders were committed to reducing inequalities, which became a high priority in their work. This could intentionally be across a broad range of issues (e.g., class, race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability), and might be expressed in a range of ways, such as reducing achievement gaps or increasing student participation and engagement. A commitment to reducing inequalities does frame social justice in specific ways, and it does rule out those who argue that the promotion of social justice is not incompatible with, and may involve, a widening of inequalities.

This leads to the second element of the sampling strategy whereby school principals were asked to self-identify themselves as social justice leaders in the terms used in the project. In keeping with this broad approach, the group developed a set of research questions that offered the opportunity for participants’ own views of their values, motivations, and actions to set the agenda for the research. The questions were deliberately open-ended, and sought to start from the premise that social justice as a concept expressed in policy is often unclear, incoherent, and open to multiple interpretations. The group sought to understand how principals made sense of social justice for themselves, before exploring in more detail how their values, motivations, and actions might be framed within the wider contexts in which they functioned. This investigation has focused on the following research questions:

1. How do social justice leaders make sense of “social justice”?
2. What do social justice leaders do?
3. What factors help and hinder the work of social justice leaders?
4. How did social justice leaders learn to become social justice leaders?

The Social Justice Leadership strand of ISLDN involves 28 researchers. Cases have been selected and interviews conducted with principals in 15 different countries. The research is clearly at an early stage, with initial interviews conducted with school principals using a common interview schedule related to the four research questions. What follows are some provisional findings from this research.
How do social justice leaders make sense of social justice?

The most common response from school principals was to articulate social justice as a type of “fairness for all”, recognizing that social injustice meant unequal life chances, based on poverty and discrimination (Risku, 2012; Tian, 2012). As leaders of educational institutions, there was a strong emphasis on casting social justice in terms of supporting students to overcome disadvantage and become full participants in society. Social justice was often framed in terms of the individual students within the school’s local community. Principals’ concerns tended to be immediate and practical with little sense of theorizing about social justice, or locating their critique of social injustice within a wider structural critique of societal arrangements. One view that stood out as particularly distinct was a Latin American principal who asserted, “There is no social justice if there is no active participation of the people”. This approach emphasized principles of solidarity, cooperation, and respect for human rights as the basis of social justice (Torres, Cerdas Montana, & Slater 2012). In this sense, associational justice was privileged over distributive justice (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003). This principal’s view, however, was the exception when compared with the other interviewees.
What do social justice leaders do?

As might be expected, the range of responses to this question was extremely broad, depending on the specificities of local context. There was an interesting mix between principals who advocated equal treatment approaches (based on holding everyone to common standards and expectations) and those who relied more heavily on individualizing approaches according to the specific needs and circumstances of students. One school principal from China talked about children having “the same life but different excellences” and therefore the need to “celebrate diversity and difference in terms of equality of value” (Wilson, 2012). Common across many of the principals’ approaches was a strong ethic of care, especially to make sure care was visible (Duncan, 2012). Principals were very aware of the precariousness and vulnerabilities of many of their students’ lives, and the need for schools to provide an environment that offered stability and security. One school principal from England (who had previously stated “I take into my school the kids other schools don’t want to teach”) drew an analogy between her relationship to students and her experience as a mother:

“I came at being a social justice leader as I did as a mother...I run the school as I run my family...I believe in the young people...they come first...They are not scared of me...they are scared of me disapproving of what they have done. (Potter, 2012)”

Another aspect of school principals’ actions that emerged strongly from the data was a sense of active principalship (Norberg & Arlestig, 2012), whereby these school leaders felt the need to be highly visible within their schools and communities. Issues of social injustice are more acute in challenging environments and the principals in this study recognized the need to be seen and to be available to both students and their wider community. Several principals described their role in terms of being activists for their school’s community and advocating for their community’s collective interests. This was perceived to be an important aspect of their work, and points to the high demand placed on school leaders in challenging contexts and the difficulties of sustaining leadership in a context where boundaries of time and space are much more porous.
There were clearly a range of factors that supported principals and undermined their social justice mission. National-level policies intended to support equity were identified as a considerable help to school principals in their work — although with some qualifications. What appeared to be particularly significant was the way in which principals were able to work creatively with policies to mobilize the opportunities they provided to support their social justice efforts. This required considerable leadership skill. It is also important to recognize that policies could frequently undermine social justice work, and in some cases these were the unintended consequences of policies formed to support equity aspirations. In these cases, principals were presented with difficult moral dilemmas as they juggled the needs of individual students with the wider needs of their school (Stevenson, 2007). Navigating policy, by exploiting positive outcomes, while mitigating negative ones, was a key leadership skill for these school leaders. Besides policy hindrances, the other factor impeding school leaders was the sheer scale of the challenges students faced in their lives. Although not a universal experience, there was a common view that both short- and long-term factors were adding greater insecurity to the lives of students.
How did social justice leaders learn to become social justice leaders?

Many of the principals made deliberate career choices to work in particular types of schools, in which their commitment to social justice could have greater impact. In these cases, their commitment to social justice was seen to be the product of a complex web of life experiences and influences. Several cited religious influences and/or their own personal experiences of living with disadvantage (Angelle, 2012). This was summarized by a Chinese principal who attributed his social justice convictions to “a whole-life experience of unfairness and social injustice in society” and therefore a commitment to challenge inequities for others (Wilson, 2012). Within these responses, it is interesting to note that interviewees focused on their own acquisition of social justice values, rather than on the acquisition of the skills they required to be an effective social justice leader. This gap in our understanding is guiding the future work of the project: How do leaders committed to social justice learn to be effective in their mission?
The second strand of the ISLDN focuses on how school leaders address student and community challenges in “high-need” schools. Similar to the Social Justice group, the initial discussions among the Nigh-Need Schools team members raised several important issues that have guided their work: (a) determining how high-need schools are defined in different countries, (b) identifying local and national policies aimed at high-need schools, (c) completing case studies revealing the strategies leaders in high-need schools employ, and (d) determining ways in which high-need school leaders are prepared and supported. Initially, the countries represented were Australia, Italy, New Zealand, Mexico, Sweden, and the United States. Recently, members from Canada, China, the Republic of Georgia, and Malaysia have joined the project. Presently, 16 researchers have conducted 22 studies in eight countries.

Because of the lack of studies examining how leaders of high-need schools attempt to turn around and sustain changes to these environments (Duke, 2012b), the group began by identifying factors that affect conditions in high-need schools in their countries which include: (a) student and community characteristics (e.g., ethnic minorities, mobility, poverty, non-native language speakers), (b) student performance (e.g., math and reading scores, graduation rates, attendance), and (c) other contributing factors (e.g., teacher and leader turnover, staff morale, student engagement). As a result of these discussions, the group has begun to examine leadership in high-need, low-performing schools; policies affecting these types of schools; and initiatives aimed at preparing future leaders for these types of school settings. A review of these studies and findings is presented in the following pages.
Despite the relative infancy of the ISLDN, research team members have collected data about school leaders working in urban, suburban, and rural communities; national policies affecting high-need schools and their leaders; and professional development programs for turnaround school specialists. These include:

- Early childhood centers (Mexico)
- Elementary/primary schools (China, Mexico, USA)
- Middle schools (Mexico)
- Secondary schools (Australia, New Zealand, Sweden)
- Pre K-12 schools (Australia, Republic of Georgia, New Zealand)
- State-level policies and preparation (USA)
- National policies (Republic of Georgia, Sweden)

As a result of these investigations, insights have emerged about how principals strive to turn around high-need, low-performing schools as well as how policymakers are attempting to address the needs of these schools and their leaders.
Leadership at the school level

ISLDN researchers have conducted two types of case studies of school leaders across a variety of national contexts. First, they have observed and interviewed principals and teachers, capturing snapshots of the leadership strategies principals are using in high-need, low-performing schools in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Second, one of the studies followed a turnaround leader over three years, capturing the dynamic nature of conditions over time. Both of these types of studies have revealed important information about the realities of turnaround leadership in high-need schools.

The short-term case studies demonstrated the strategies principals used to confront challenging aspects of their schools, including low staff morale; poor student academic performance, attendance, and graduation; high mobility rates of students and teachers; and community apathy. Principals intervened at different levels, oftentimes using multiple strategies simultaneously. First, they took a macro view by attempting to alter the school’s vision and culture. This included developing an integrated intervention plan using comprehensive data collection and decision-making processes (Drysdale, Gurr, & Villalobos, 2012), being organized and planning thoughtfully (Notman, 2012), and constantly clarifying and communicating desired values and performance expectations (Gu & Johansson, 2012; Hipp & Baran, 2013). Teachers who were unable or unwilling to meet new performance expectations were relocated to other schools (Wildy & Clarke, 2012). In some instances, improving the school’s grounds and facilities gave communities a renewed sense of hope that a more productive school learning environment would affect their children (Bryant & Sharvashidze, 2013).

Second, realizing the importance of human potential to effect change, principals developed the expertise and capacity of teachers and other campus leaders (Notman, 2012). This occurred by investing in external leadership development programs, ensuring
leadership team meetings provided opportunities for professional learning and sharing, and conducting leadership development sessions for teachers and staff members (Drysdale et al, 2012). Other high-need school principals recognized the value of involving staff members in determining areas for improvement, planning and implementing goals, and reviewing progress (Hipp & Baran, 2013). Recognizing the importance of relationship building, a principal in a remote Australian Aboriginal village commented, “I am best at getting along with people. I think my greatest success here has been to build good relationships among teachers, throughout the community, and between all the students” (Wildy & Clarke, 2012, p. 26).

Third, gaining an understanding of the factors affecting the community context, especially the values and assets of parents and community organizations, was an important aspect of these principals’ actions. They were well aware of the chronic problems facing families living in poverty, such as lack of food and health care services. Similar to the tendencies of social justice leaders, principals utilized school resources to purchase food for students and work with local agencies to provide services (Wildy & Clarke, 2012). In an attempt to gain greater parental involvement, some schools entered into formal agreements with parents, requiring them to attend conferences with teachers, monitor their children’s homework assignments, and provide transportation (Hipp & Baran, 2013). To regain community trust, principals demonstrated their willingness to confront their past history of ineffectiveness in order to convince parents of the school’s current efficacy (Drysdale et al, 2012; Qian, 2013). In extreme cases, principals and teachers dealt with episodic traumatic events that disrupted their local communities, such as student suicides and natural disasters (Notman, 2012).

Finally, these short-term case studies revealed concentrated efforts by principals to improve and monitor the teaching and learning processes in their schools (Gu & Johansson, 2012; Hipp &
Baran, 2013; Notman, 2012). In some instances, they utilized externally-mandated resources, as demonstrated by Mexican principals who used the government’s distribution of new textbooks and demand for new teaching practices to stimulate reform in their schools (Rincones, 2012). Despite resistance from teachers to these new reforms, principals realized these governmental resources allowed them to provide instructional support beyond what their local communities could afford. In other cases, they took advantage of local needs and interests in designing curriculum. One example of this approach was a principal who used the students’ and community’s love of art by displaying murals and pictures around the school, designing math lessons to incorporate artistic drawings, and creating an art gallery to display student work (Wildy & Clarke, 2012).

Another way to capture high-need school principals’ leadership is to examine their actions over time. Duke (2012a) determined how a turnaround school principal sought to sustain student improvement efforts over three years. Rather than a stagnant linear process, school improvement was dynamic. On one hand, the findings revealed the school maintained some initiatives throughout the three years, including several literacy programs and teacher teams. On the other hand, new programs and activities were begun and others were changed or replaced. For instance, efforts to increase parental choice, teacher-led committees, and assessment for learning activities were introduced. In addition, changes were made to existing processes, such as teachers setting their own improvement goals, increasing cross-grade ability grouping, reducing “pull-out” programs in favor of “push-in” programs, and modifying end-of-year reviews. This study clearly demonstrated the iterative nature of school improvement, especially in low-performing schools striving to maintain and turn around student and teacher performance over time.
Besides creating sanctions for under-performing schools and systems, federal and state governments have created policies and provided resources intended to support high-need schools (Duke, 2012b). Although many of these policies and resource allocations are well intended, shifts in government leadership and reforms can create inconsistencies in reform implementation and support. Unstable leadership in the Republic of Georgia has affected the implementation of reforms in teacher licensing, English language education, and programs for non-ethnic learners (Bryant & Sharvashidze, 2013). The Mexican government has launched a host of reforms, such as competency-based teaching practices, extended-day programs, site-based/community participatory decision making, and programs to reduce school violence (Rincones, 2012). State-level politicians in the United States have instituted a number of incentives to improve working conditions in low-performing schools. Examples include grants to high-need school districts to create partnerships with universities and colleges focusing on math and science instruction, revisions to teacher licensing requirements, site-based committees for teacher hiring, and bonuses for teachers working in low-performing schools (Baran, 2012).
Recently, a variety of leadership development programs have been established to support school leaders working in high-need, low-performing schools. Although university leadership preparation programs have been overlooked as potential sources of support (Duke, 2013), a notable exception is the Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program (VSTSP) housed at the University of Virginia since 2004. Sponsored by the Virginia State Department of Education, each year the program provides professional learning experiences and coaching for 10 Virginia principals in high-need schools (Duke, 2012b). Based on the successes of the VSTSP, other programs aimed at developing school turnaround specialists have emerged. For instance, Microsoft, Carnegie Corporation, and Mass Insight have contributed funding to support principals serving in low-performing schools across the country. In addition, educational agencies have elected to support and prepare school turnaround specialists. The Texas Education Agency (2013) established the Texas Turnaround Leadership Academy (TTLA) to build the capacities of schools and districts to identify qualified turnaround specialists, establish improvement strategies for underperforming campuses, and collaborate with other schools engaged in turnaround initiatives.

One of the most ambitious state-wide turnaround specialist programs has been created by the Southern Educational Research Board in collaboration with the Florida Department of Education, referred to as the Florida Turnaround Leaders Program (FTLP) (Duke, 2013). Rather than working with practicing school administrators, this program identifies teacher leaders with the potential to become turnaround specialists. Aimed at improving the performance of Florida’s middle, secondary, and charter schools, the first cohort of 110 teachers began the two-and-a-half-year program in the spring of 2012. The major components of the program include a year-long practicum with four-person teams assigned to a low-performing school in their district followed by a six-month internship, working in an underachieving school.
The research findings from the ISLDN not only highlights contemporary developments in educational policy from an international perspective, but also is relevant for urban school leadership. Urban schools, and the unique challenges they pose for school leaders, are part of a global experience. This is in part because the experiences in urban areas are increasingly shaped by global developments. Economic policy, the jobs that flow from it (inwards and outwards), and the population movements that follow, have a profound effect on local communities. It is important to recognize that the challenges faced by urban school leaders, whether in Chicago, Shanghai, or Mexico City, are in part a result of the same global pressures. However, these pressures are mediated in very different ways as global trends collide with local cultures and contexts. The rich multi-country case-studies from the ISLDN project emphasize both the similarities, and the differences, that are the reality of urban school leadership in many contexts. While there is pressure for uniformity, it is also important to recognize that each school faces its own unique context.

Overall, the studies conducted by the ISLDN teams reveal several themes regarding the realities school leaders face in striving to improve the learning conditions for their students, teachers, and communities. First, these school leaders realize the restrictions and problems associated with external state and federal policies; however, they are quite savvy about using policies to their advantage, realizing how these types of resources can
support their intended reform initiatives beyond what is available at the local level. In this way, they are quite adept at using external resources and programs to ensure their schools’ needs are being met. Second, they work tirelessly to learn more about the values and challenges of the students, parents, and citizens in their communities. They are highly visible in order to better understand the physical, economic, social, and cultural aspects of the environment. This first-hand knowledge allows them to reconnect with communities that may have lost confidence in the school, seek additional resources to address the community’s needs, and advocate for community values within the school environment and curriculum. These leaders view community values and culture as an asset, rather than a liability to the school.

Finally, the commitment to leading urban school reform is based on a variety of life experiences. On one hand, being a social justice advocate or a leader attempting to turn around a high-need school is not something that can be easily taught to school leaders. Other significant life experiences, including religious upbringing and personally experiencing discrimination and disadvantaged conditions, have a profound influence on the moral commitment and courage of these school leaders. On the other hand, sensitizing leaders to the realities of urban schools, especially those needing to turn around performance, can be enhanced through preparation activities, including concentrated practicum and internships experiences similar to what is occurring in the FTLP.
Clearly, there is a wealth of future research that can be conducted to reveal more information about how urban leaders lead school reform around the world. For example, one particularly promising area of inquiry is to understand how principals’ time use in various national contexts influences student learning (Lee & Hallinger, 2012). Such studies would provide more context-specific information about the pathways that principals and others in the school use to influence teaching and learning. These investigations also can examine how students’ social and emotional learning outcomes are being influenced, areas which are particularly important for urban school systems to address. In addition, cross-national studies could focus on how school leaders interpret and implement national and local reform initiatives. These studies would provide insights into how school leaders use these reforms as opportunities to address important inequities in their school systems and communities. Furthermore, attention could be devoted to understanding how principals work with and through others in the school to provide meaningful learning experiences for students. Rather than considering the principal as the sole source of social justice leadership in high-need schools, studies could examine how other administrators and teachers obtain and sustain resources, reduce inequities, and improve students’ academic and social learning outcomes.

Although the ISLDN suggests we can learn a great deal from the experiences of school leaders in a variety of different social and cultural contexts, there can be no globalized “one size fits all” formula for leading urban schools. This has important implications for those who seek to support school leaders to take on challenging roles in urban contexts. Understanding the conditions in which we can learn from each other, within and between different national contexts is important; however, our analyses and leadership development strategies need to be sufficiently nuanced to recognize that the work of school leaders committed to social justice, and working in high-need schools, must be contextualized. This can only be achieved when there is a rich understanding of the factors that comprise the macro and micro contexts of schooling, and how school leaders in different urban settings are able to successfully challenge the social injustices that arise from poverty, discrimination, and inequities.
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