

Education Management and Leadership: A Rapid Review of the Literature

Magdalena Fernandez Hermosilla, Stephen Anderson & Karen Mundy

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

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This rapid review of international literature on education management and leadership was conducted for the Strengthening Education Systems in East Africa (SESEA) project sponsored by Aga Khan Foundation Canada and the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (formerly CIDA). This is one of a set of rapid reviews on key dimensions of school improvement developed as input to a research agenda setting process for East Africa for the Learning and Dialogue component of the SESEA project. The complete set addressed the following themes: teaching and learning, teacher development, education management and leadership, parent and community involvement and early childhood education and development.¹

Teachers supported by effective management and leadership are widely held as one of the keys to education quality and change (Chapman & Adams, 2002). At the same time, the school improvement literature internationally affirms that effective school leadership is an important condition for a successful school, but not in isolation of other contributing factors (Bryk et al, 2010; Day and Sammons, 2013). There are two relevant bodies of knowledge on school management and leadership that frame this rapid review: (a) the characteristics of effective school managers and leaders; (b) the development of effective school managers and leaders. Current evidence is reviewed in the next section. Within the scope of school management this review also includes two sub-themes related to school governance that are of particular relevance in the developing world: (a) decentralization as translated into different types of School-Based Management (SBM); and (2) privatization. Changes in school governance associated with decentralization of education to local authorities and with privatization in many developing countries involve significant change in expectations and in the prominence of head teachers and communities in improving schools (Chapman & Adams, 2002; Oduro, Fertig & Raviera, 2007). This rapid review on school management and leadership provides a synthesis of the research literature as well as a summary of current issues and gaps in the literature are reviewed.

Rapid Review of the Knowledge Base

Effective School Managers and Leaders

The literature on characteristics of effective school managers and leaders focuses primarily on principals, despite a growing interest in models of shared or distributed leadership. The evidence about successful principals in developed countries explores practices, behaviors and competencies associated with positive indicators of quality and improvement in teaching and learning. Generally, there is convergence in a set of key leadership practices associated with principal effectiveness when enacted in a coherent goal-focused way (Louis et al, 2010; Robinson et al 2009; Day & Sammons 2013): e.g., developing consensus on school goals focused

on student learning; developing teacher knowledge and skills to effectively teach; creating workplace conditions and relationships that support teaching and learning (e.g., time for teachers to plan and learn together, parent/community involvement); and managing the instructional program to support pursuit of school goals (e.g., resourcing, staffing, monitoring and use of assessment data for decisions about improvement in teaching and learning, and ensuring an orderly climate conducive for learning).

While there are ongoing debates about the relative effectiveness of alternative models of school leadership (e.g. transformational versus instructional/pedagogical), critical literature on this topic supports the greater impact of instructional leadership on students' outcomes (Robinson et al, 2009; Day & Sammons, 2013). Leadership scholars caution, however, that leadership styles are not mutually exclusive, and are generally inclined to promote a combination of approaches to ensure school success. Leadership research emphasizes that leadership effects operate indirectly to promote student outcomes by supporting and enhancing conditions for teaching and learning through direct impacts on teachers and their work (Day & Sammons, 2013; Robinson et al., 2009). Leadership in this sense is considered a driver of change and a catalytic agent for improvement (Bryk et al., 2010) in student learning not a direct causal influence.

The literature on school leadership and quality in developing countries also focuses on the role of principals, addressing their role in managing schools with basic resources challenges (e.g. quality of school facilities, teaching and learning materials, funding) and in the enactment of basic management tasks (budgeting, planning, resource management), as well as the perceived need for instructional leadership in the context of external reform initiatives promoted by governments and donor agencies. Systemic changes in school governance in developing countries have dramatically altered the role of principal and local educational authorities (Oduro et al., 2007; Chapman et al, 2010; Barrera-Osorio, 2009). Studies in these countries explore decentralization in the form of different types of school based management that are discussed in the section on school governance in this review. Regarding school principals, the literature suggests that these types of reforms increase their responsibilities and accountability, shifting expectations from a bureaucratic administrative role focused on carrying out orders and complying with administrative regulations from supervisory authorities towards a role that includes leadership to improve and sustain school quality. Studies that explore policy changes related to school governance in developing countries demonstrate that along with the changes in responsibilities and autonomy, principals still face challenging practical constraints to carry out their work effectively (Oplatka, 2004). Overall, there is less research evidence available on the characteristics and practices of effective school leaders in developing countries, particularly on how principals are enacting instructional leadership and school improvement (Oduro et al, 2007).

Globally, the importance of leadership beyond the school at the local educational authority level (e.g., school district) is recognized (Togneri and Anderson, 2003). There is, however, less evidence about the skills and characteristics of effective leadership at this level than at the school level (Waters & Marzano, 2006). The initial evidence in developed countries suggests school district leadership effectiveness has a moderate impact on student's achievement. There is agreement about some common characteristics of successful leadership at the local education authority or school district level, including: collaboration in goal setting

with different stakeholders (e.g. district officials and supervisors, professional staff, community governors); agreement on goals for achievement and instruction; alignment of district support with district goals; monitoring goals for achievement and instruction; and use of resources to support achievement and instruction goals (Waters & Marzano, 2006; Anderson, 2006). Leadership at the intermediate level has not been the focus of research in developing countries, and as a consequence, evidence on the effectiveness, characteristics of supports, and relations that local education authority agents establish with schools to enhance improvement represents a significant gap in knowledge about education leadership and management in those contexts.

Development of Effective School Managers and Leaders

The professional development of effective school managers and leaders is an area accompanied by increasing evidence in the last decade. Common findings from international research on effective principal development programs (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 2007; Mitgang, 2013; Mendels and Mitgang, 2013) include the following: (a) principals need pre-service and ongoing development for both management and instructional leadership responsibilities; (b) effective principal programs are linked to principal competency standards and develop practices associated with school success (e.g. cultivating a shared vision, leading instructional improvement, developing organizational capacity, and managing change); and (c) principal development programs delivered by universities are most effective when they are integrated with provisions for mentoring of new principals and with ongoing professional learning supports provided by local education authorities.

There are different approaches to school leadership development. The effective programs evidence suggests offering an array of opportunities for learning grounded in practice including problem-based learning; action research; field-based projects; journal writing; portfolios based on feedback and ongoing self, peer, and family assessment; and activities to develop skills such as supervised internships, analysis of classroom, on-the job observations, establishing collegial learning networks with other principals, mentoring and peer coaching (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Mendels and Mitgang, 2013).

Research on school leadership development programs in developing countries, although less available and accessible, focuses more on the general preparation for school leadership than on evidence program effectiveness. The research describes training and development for principals occurring in different forms, including indirect preparation through performance of previous leadership roles, participation in in-service training courses, and attending conferences, as well as personal initiatives of individual principals. In many developing countries (e.g. Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, South Africa) there are no system-wide provisions or funding for initial preparation of principals and in-service courses and programs are few and irregular in terms of quality. As a consequence, most of their preparation is informal, practical and happens within the workplace (Bush & Oduro, 2006; DeJaeghere, Williams, and Kyeyune, 2009; Ibrahim, 2011). These seem to be the case for secondary school principals as well, where preparation for school leaders is unsystematic and most are ill prepared for the job (Leu et al. 2005).

School Governance

Decentralization reforms have been introduced since the 80's in different parts of the developed and developing world (e.g. United States, Canada, China, Israel, Brazil, El Salvador, Mexico, Indonesia, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Rwanda, Senegal). In developing world countries the shift from centralized to decentralized systems has often occurred under the influence of international donor agencies and global education institutions (Kingdon et al., 2014) arguing that decentralization and increased autonomy and accountability at the local level ensures that schools respond to local priorities and values, increasing client satisfaction and improving educational outcomes overall (Barrera-Osorio, 2009; Bruns et al, 2011). Evidence to support the claimed benefits of systemic decentralization is less optimistic. Research on the politics of decentralization indicates that many of the expected benefits do not apply particularly in the context of poor rural areas where "local elite close up the spaces for wider community representation and participation in school affairs." (Kingdon et al., 2014, p.2)

Decentralization in the form of school-based management (SBM) varies according to whom the authority for decision-making is devolved (e.g. principal, teachers, parents, or a combination between the three) and the activities over which authority is being provided (e.g. budget allocation, hiring and firing of teachers and other school staff, curriculum development, textbooks and other educational materials, infrastructure improvement, monitoring and evaluating of teacher performance and student outcomes). Examples of SBM are well documented around the world, although rigorous evaluations of SBM initiatives programs are less accessible. Overall, the evidence suggests: (1) SBM policies do change the dynamics of the school, mobilizing either parents or teachers to get more involved; (2) a positive impact in reducing repetition rates, failure rates, and to a lesser degree, dropout rates; and (3) mixed evidence on the relationship to student outcomes depending on the country, with some studies showing positive association (e.g. El Salvador, Kenya, Mexico, and Nicaragua) and other showing no effects on standardized tests scores (e.g. Brazil and Honduras) (Bruns et al 2011).

Another policy explored globally and in the last decade in Africa is the Capitation Grants schemes, where fixed amount of funds are introduced based on the number of students enrolled as a way of replacing revenue lost by schools due to abolition of school fees and contributions as part of universal primary education policy mandates. Capitation Grants funds are meant to finance the purchase of textbooks and teaching materials, fund repairs, administration materials and examination expenses. These funds are also meant to contribute to the reduction of social exclusion as children from poor households can more easily afford to attend school. The evidence in Africa (e.g. Ghana, Tanzania) suggests net enrolment rose sharply after the introduction of capitation grants, especially in the early grades of elementary (Uwazi, 2010; Akyeampong, 2011); however, the enrolment growth places a greater challenge for systems unprepared to deal with increasing enrolments in terms of infrastructure and with attendance and dropout issues associated with the influx of larger numbers of previously unserved students. Studies show that the benefits of capitation grants are sometimes offset by budget and management issues, such as insufficient grant funds to buy the minimum teaching materials and textbooks, money budgeted centrally that is not always received at the schools, lack of clarity about the timing of disbursements, and funds arriving in small amounts rather than meaningful amounts, all of which causes difficulties at school level budget planning (Uwazi,

2010). Despite clear gains in funding levels and control at the school level over funds for material resources, the contribution of capitation grants to improved quality learning outcomes are unclear.

School governance also varies among countries in terms of type and level of involvement of the private sector in education. Private sector interests in many countries have been increasingly involved in the form of philanthropic initiatives, private management of public schools (e.g. contract schools and charter schools in the US, School Management Initiatives in Pakistan, Concession schools in Colombia), government purchase of educational services from private schools (e.g. secondary education in Uganda, and other experiences in Ivory Coast, the Philippines, New Zealand, Venezuela, and Pakistan); and voucher programmes that enable parents to choose providers in a competitive market place of public and private school providers (e.g. Colombia, New Zealand, Netherlands, Milwaukee in the US, Pakistan, and Chile) (LaRocque, 2008). Despite the increasing presence of government subsidized and non-subsidized private education provisions around the world, studies of the effects on school quality and improvement and on education systems overall are inconclusive. Here we summarize evidence from a recent review of research on privatization in developing countries, where the emphasis is on low cost private schools for lower income families (Day Ashley et al., 2014).

The strongest evidence suggests improved teaching in private schools in terms of higher levels of teacher presence, teaching activity and practices associated with improved results. These findings seem contradictory to the finding that teachers in low cost private schools that target lower income families are often less qualified, have lower salaries and weak job security in comparison to their public school counterparts. One explanation is that teachers are more accountable to their employers in private schools, and are less likely to be absent from school or not actively teaching in the classroom as expected. A contributing factor is that private school teachers may be more compliant with employer expectations regarding the use of selected instructional programs, materials and practices. At the same time, researchers note an absence of consistency in defining high quality teaching in the literature on privatization, and the difficulty comparing findings between schools or countries. In sum, the evidence that the quality of teaching practices is actually better in private schools is not conclusive at the present time.

There is mixed evidence that private school pupils achieve better learning outcomes. Many of the studies do not control adequately for the effects of students' background on student learning outcomes or show longitudinal evidence of student and school performance. Evidence on the effects of private schools on students' outcomes is not uniform across countries, different types of private school configurations, and even across subject matters. There is moderate evidence that the costs of education delivery can be lower in private schools in comparison to public schools. This is often attributable to lower teacher salaries and benefits.

The emergence and expansion of low cost private schools in regions of the developing world such as Africa, is often argued as means of achieving goals of universal access as well as improvements in quality. The evidence is weak and inconclusive, however, on how well private schools geographically and demographically reach the poor and otherwise traditionally marginalized families and students in urban and rural areas, notwithstanding the lower costs.

The relationship between private schools and parents is not well understood, for example, whether private schools routinely account for results to users, are responsive to demands and complaints, or involve parents in decision-making and student learning in positive ways. Research on parent perceptions of private schools indicates that parents often believe that they are of better quality than public schools, although parents' perception of better quality are likely to be informed informally and not by actual comparative evidence of student performance.

At the system level much remains to be learned about trends towards privatization of schools, and the role of governments in regulating, monitoring quality or even subsidizing private schools. Should private schools complement or compete with government schools, and what impact does growth in the private school sector have on quality and equity of the education system overall? What evidence there is suggests that attempts by states to intervene and to regulate quality in private education are constrained by lack of understanding, legitimacy and knowledge of government education authorities about how to create and implement effective policy frameworks for both public and private sector education (Day Ashley et al, 2014).

Knowledge Gaps

The literature on school managers and leaders, particularly in developing world contexts, focuses attention primarily on school principals. Studies across North America and Northern Europe increasingly recognize that school principals often accomplish their school leadership work in collaboration with other formal and informal leaders (assistant principals, teachers in leadership roles) through different forms of shared and distributed leadership. Research on school management leadership practice in developing world contexts has not explored the practice and potential for shared and distributed school leadership to accomplish school goals.

Leadership models and styles described in the literature suggest a common set of competencies and skills across countries. This might be the result of researchers around the world using the same models of leadership (instructional, transformational, distributed) based on the international evidence, without introducing new elements pertinent to the local context. Some researchers in developing countries warn about the assumption that leadership styles are universally applicable and the existence of generic competencies (Oduro et al, 2007). Future research may contribute to theory as well as to policy and practice through further exploration of effective leadership beliefs and practices that are sensitive to contextual differences.

Research on school principals and their work in developing countries typically deals with issues concerning their limited authority, autocratic leadership styles, the role of principals on teacher evaluation, low degree of change initiation, and lack of management or instructional leadership functions and capacity (Oplatka, 2004; Oduro et al., 2007). Few studies explore elements hindering or preventing leaders to implement more effective practices in their schools on their own or in response to principal training initiatives. As previously noted, no systematic knowledge exists about the characteristics, roles, behaviors and relative effectiveness of local educational authorities in terms leading and supporting school improvement in developing countries.

In terms of school leader training and development, the literature offers a picture of effective programs providing a different mixture of opportunities to learn, but still remains uncertainty about the most effective models. Furthermore, the literature does not communicate agreement on how to best assess the influence of different leadership development programs on principals beliefs and practices and indirectly on the quality of teaching and learning in schools.

Regarding SBM and decentralization, many studies evaluate the effectiveness in various contexts in terms of student outcomes (e.g., enrolment, attendance, performance). Researchers of decentralization reforms suggest paying attention to outcomes associated with different types of SBM, including the provision and use of capitation grants, and introducing more rigorous cost-effective analysis (Barrera-Osorio et al 2009). At the same time, although studies indicate school and system leaders responsibilities have changed as a result of decentralization and SBM, there is less certainty about the effective implementation of expected changes in leadership and management authority and practices and about school leader (e.g., principals, school management committees) capacity development within new governance systems.

In our review of the recent literature on the growing phenomenon of privatization, particularly in the form of low cost private schools that target lower income families and students, we reported that findings on the impact of the introduction of private schools on the quality of teachers and teaching, short and long term student learning, parental involvement, education funding, school and system leadership within the private school sector itself and in comparison with the public schools remains mixed and inconclusive, and may be highly context dependent. Privatization is a hot topic for debate, practice and research in East Africa and other regions of the developing world where it has taken hold (Day Ashley et al, 2014).

Notes

1. The series of rapid reviews utilized a strategic search method in order to identify key resources related to the review focus including existing systematic reviews, literature reviews, reports and other grey literature from well-known and reliable sources on school improvement in general as well as in the contexts of developing countries and East Africa specifically. To this end our team identified search terms for, conducted, and recorded more than 765 individual searches (465 in Google and 362 in Google Scholar). We combed through and collected links to potential sources from approximately 4,135 pages of Google and Google Scholar search results. After the initial search was completed we identified 1) key sub-themes; 2) prominent authors and organizations; and 3) created a list of documents to be considered for the rapid review. We sorted through and summarized key resources making note of significant findings, the evidence-base supporting these findings, and any knowledge gaps identified in the literature. The final documents included in the series of rapid reviews focused primarily on knowledge from extensive systematic reviews of the literature related to the sub-themes of this series, supplemented by recent empirical studies of particular relevance to East Africa and other developing country contexts. The list of key documents synthesized for this review of school management and leadership appear in the references at the end of this review.

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