Successful leadership in schools in challenging contexts

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The paper is about leadership but with a particular emphasis upon leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances. The research reported in the paper presents a picture of successful principals in challenging urban contexts. The findings are obtained from the Polish part of the Leading Schools Successfully in Challenging Urban Context: Strategies for Improvement project, which involves a nine country partnership between higher education institutions and thirty six schools in disadvantaged urban contexts. The paper focuses on issues connected with the transformation process, especially concerning the school leadership and leadership strategies, so that others might gain deeper understanding of how a school begins, maintains and sustains the journey toward excellence for all students. Special attention is paid on what leadership strategies were used by Principals. Case studies demonstrate how leadership capacity can be built and sustained in high poverty urban schools.

Introduction

The paper is about educational leadership, but with a particular emphasis upon leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances. The findings are obtained from the Polish part of the Leading Schools Successfully in Challenging Urban Context research project. The aims of this joint European-wide three-year project (2005-2008) were to identify, analyse, evaluate and disseminate strategies to improve school leadership in primary and secondary schools in disadvantaged urban communities in nine countries: Finland, Greece, Ireland, United Kingdom, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and The Netherlands. The setting for this study is international, yet the research reported in the paper presents merely a picture of Polish successful principals in challenging urban contexts.

Efforts to improve educational leadership should build upon the foundation of well-documented and well-accepted knowledge about school leadership that already exists. There are numerous research studies on the nature and effects of leadership (e.g., Bass, 1990; Yukl, 1994) and on successful school leadership in the literature (e.g. Hopkins, 2001). They revealed that school leadership is most successful when it is focused on teaching and learning, and that it is necessary, though not sufficient, for school improvement that leadership should take different forms in different contexts and should use various mechanism through which schools leadership achieves its effects. There is a significant body of published work that describes the ways in which Principals have run schools that have been formally ‘failed’, and restored them to effectiveness (Ainscow, Stanford, West, 2003; Hopkins, 2001). Additionally, research also identified the qualities of those who had improved the performance of schools facing challenging circumstances (Harris & Chapman, 2001; Potter, Reynolds and Chapman, 2001). These analyses also showed that those school leaders who were successful were able to reform schools facing challenging circumstances by making use of enough ‘leadership capacity’ over areas of school operations to force improvement.
Even though that research has consistently showed the importance of good leadership in ensuring improvement and the sustained success of schools, there are still many gaps in our knowledge about successful educational leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances. One of the significant issues is connected with an attempt to answer the question: ‘what leadership strategies are used by Principals of urban schools that served children in challenging circumstances?’ That question, which is a central research question in the study presented in the paper, and other questions call out for inquiry and for vigorous debate among the practitioners, policymakers, and academics who are part of the educational leadership profession.

The purpose of the paper is to increase understanding of successful leadership and leadership strategies in effective schools situated in challenging urban environments. The study which is presented in the paper might facilitate better cross-national communication and exchange concerning understanding of successful leadership and leadership strategies in effective schools in challenging urban environments. It might provide a good starting point for dialogue with diverse audiences about the successful school leadership in disadvantaged urban communities. Perhaps the key importance of the study lies in the fact that it promotes sustainable development and tackles the future challenges for education and training systems and lifelong learning.

The study – research methodology

*Procedures and Data Sources*

The *Leading Schools Successfully in Challenging Urban Context* research project (USIS) utilized a multi-case-study methodology to gather contextually sensitive data concerning individuals’ perceptions about the work of their principals, because case studies provide an opportunity to uncover causation through “insight, discovery and interpretation’ (Merriam, 1988, p. 10). Within the USIS we conducted case studies in two primary and two secondary schools in each country (a total of 36 schools which show sustaining success in communities of social and economic disadvantage).

Schools were chosen based on student performance in state or national standardized tests that exceeded expectations, principals’ exemplary reputations in the community and school system, and other indicators of success that were both site-specific and initiated during the principals' tenures. Schools selected for the project are schools with the majority of their students drawn from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds where attendance and behaviour problems have existed. The selection of schools in which the principals met the criterion of providing ‘successful’ leadership was an important element of the research. As a result of a preparatory meeting between the parties, we agreed to define a successful leader at school level as the one:

1. who has worked at school for at least five years (or one year beyond the normal cycle in particular countries);
2. who is widely acknowledged by their professional peers as being a ‘successful’ leader;
3. who achieves a rising level of: 'value-added' results regarding pupils' achievements, teacher retention, pupil attendance and social climate in the school and community.

This analysis of leading schools successfully operating in challenging urban contexts, rests upon mainly circumstantial argument that, if school improvement occurred during a principal’s watch,
then she or he may have had some hand in making it possible. In other words, it was envisaged that the study would examine the leadership approach that was most prevalent in schools facing challenging circumstances and situations where there existed perceived school success in raising their performance in challenging circumstances, through “joined-up” efforts across agencies, schools and local communities. Therefore, one of the objectives of the study was to determine whether teachers, support staff, parents, students, and the principals themselves believed the principal had played a central role in the school’s success, and if so, what had she or he done to make it happen? What leadership strategies were used by Principals of urban schools in challenging circumstances?

The research design used multiple data collection methods including: analysis of documentary evidence (there were mainly site documents i.e., minutes of meetings, press reports, public documents illustrating school and student achievements, documents about school aims, management and teaching and learning structures, staff development, monitoring and assessment procedures, school development planning; pupil social characteristics, attendance, behaviour, achievement); one-to-one (semi-structured) interviews; group interviews; questionnaire survey. Documentary evidence was used to contextualise the questionnaire and interview data. These data sources not only provided a contextual reference, but enhanced trustworthiness of each Principal’s interview narrative as well. One-to-one interviews were conducted with Principals, classroom teachers and middle managers from the core subjects. Group interviews were pupils, parents and senior managers. We interviewed each principals twice, asking them to describe their leadership practices that they believed were most effective in advancing student achievements in the schools, which were led by them.

Setting the context: the governance, policy, funding of public education and leadership in Poland

Poland is undergoing social, economic, and political change because of and in response to global economic competition, membership in the EU, migration and changing family structure, an ageing population and growing social programme costs, among other reasons. Following the downfall of the socialist regime in 1989, system transformations have taken place primarily in the political and economic areas. New political legislation became the basis for changes in Polish education. From the former close educational system (which was characterised by the primacy of information over skills, teaching by academic areas, the reduced educational role of the school and its lack of partnership with the pupils’ home, the narrow-specialisation and long-duration vocational training), a more open system is being built and its core curriculum has been developed, focusing on Christian and humanitarian values such as responsibility, respect for the cultural heritage, and at the same time on opening for the values of European and world values.

The new legislation permitted the development of non-state schools and changes in the structure of enrolment at the upper secondary level (a higher percentage of youth attending general secondary schools), as well as the doubling of the number of students attending higher education institutions. The national government has introduced a large agenda of school reform, and school leaders with new skills and initiative are needed to implement this.
The basic principles of the Polish education system are included in the Education System Act of 7 September 1991 with further amendments. Education is defined as part of ‘the common welfare of the whole of society’. It should be guided by the principles contained in the Constitution and by instructions contained in universal, international legislation and conventions. In particular, this system should provide, among other things, a fulfillment of the right of each citizen in the Republic of Poland to learn and the right of children and young people to be educated and cared for; support provided by schools to back up the educational role of the family; the possibility for various entities to establish and run schools and institutions; the adjustment of the contents, methods and organisation of education to pupils’ psycho-physical abilities, and the possibility to avail oneself of psychological assistance and of special forms of didactic work; the possibility for disabled and maladjusted children and young people to learn at all types of schools and general access to secondary schools.

The main role in initiating and exercising control over current and long-term educational policy is played by the Minister of National Education. The reform of the State administration system and the education reform assume that only the national educational policy will be developed and carried out centrally, while the administration of education and the running of schools, pre-school institutions and other educational establishments are decentralised. The responsibility for the administration of public kindergartens, primary schools and gymnasia has been delegated to local authorities (communes). It has become the statutory responsibility of powiaty (districts) to administer upper secondary schools, artistic and special schools. The provinces (voivodships) have the co-ordinating function, supervising the implementation of the policy of the ministry and being responsible for pedagogical supervision.

Regional level in Poland is the level of voivodship. As from 1999 the number of voivodships is 16. The education superintendent (kurator) is the chief educational body at regional level. He is responsible for general administration of education in a voivodship. He is appointed by the head of province, the voivode, so he is a regional administration official supervised by the voivode (a voivode is subordinated to the prime minister). The education superintendent implements the policy of the minister of education.

At the motion of the kurator, the respective head of province (voivode) can establish representations, or branches, of superintendent’s office (so-called delegatury) for smaller areas of the voivodship. The branches have the same powers as kurator. At the regional level, voivodship self-governments are responsible for running certain types of educational institutions. These institutions are: teacher training colleges, teacher in-service training centres, pedagogical libraries, schools and institutions of importance for a given region.

District level in Poland is the level of powiat (an intermediate administrative unit between the voivodship and the commune, established on the force of the Act on the introduction of the three-tier administrative division of the country of 24 July 1998). There are 379 powiaty now. Powiaty exercise administrative control over upper secondary general (lyceum ogólnokształcące, liceum profilowane) and vocational (technikum, zasadnicza szkoła zawodowa) schools, as well as over post-secondary schools (szkoła politechniczna) and public special schools. They are also responsible for the management of artistic schools, sports schools, lifelong education centres, psychological and pedagogical guidance centres, and out-of-school education centres.
Local level in Poland is the level of commune (gmina). In 2004 there were 2,478, of which most were rural ones. Communes exercise administrative control over pre-school institutions, primary schools and lower secondary schools called gymnasiwm (gimnazjum), established in 1999/2000. Pedagogical supervision is excluded from their tasks - it is the responsibility of education superintendent (kurator).

In the year 2000 a uniform system of allocation of funds with the use of the algorithmic formula based on the number of pupils was adopted for the whole education system. This formula is based on the real number of pupils, adequately increased by the system of weightings, taking into account specific conditions, i.e. rural areas, small towns, as well as specific educational tasks, i.e. the presence of SEN pupils, integration of SEN pupils in mainstream education, vocational training, sports schools. The local government unit, as a body running or subsidising the school, is responsible for the designing of a budget programme (i.e. a plan of expenditures) for all schools and educational institutions in its respective area. Educational investments belong to local governments’ own tasks, although they can be co-financed from the State Budget through voivodship authorities.

Numerous reforms and efforts to streamline the education governance and delivery system are shifting power and responsibility, opening new opportunity, and creating tensions. One key to the substantial changes sought for the system lies with a - reculturing of the school leadership ranks. School leaders’ roles have changed from practising teachers with added responsibilities to full-time professional managers of human, financial and other resources accountable for their results. This has meant that more and more tasks have been added to the job description: instructional leadership, staff evaluation, budget management, performance assessment, accountability, and community relations, to name some of the most prominent ones.

In the contemporary Polish environment, the range of knowledge and skills that effective school leaders need today is daunting: curricular, pedagogical, student and adult learning in addition to managerial and financial skills, abilities in group dynamics, interpersonal relations and communications. Polish Principals are being pulled in many directions between management, leadership and accountability pressures. They not feel well prepared to take on the challenges. However, the picture concerning the availability and quality of training and professional development of school leaders across Poland is mixed. Poland now provide school principals and senior staff with significantly more training, and support than they received in the past. However, opportunities for school leaders in this area leave room for improvement. Moreover, much preparation and professional development may not be effective in fitting school leaders to today’s challenges. This perspective suggests there is a need to focus on the range of leadership preparation and development programmes to understand how they can contribute to improve school leadership.

Findings

The primary purpose of this research effort was to generate a deeper understanding of how these four Polish urban schools facing challenging circumstances changed in a way that resulted in high levels of academic achievement for their students. There were several important change strategies that were used by the Principals of these schools. In this section of the paper, these
change strategies are described and discussed. Using samples of the narrative data, I will try to illustrate how the Principals, who took part in this study, used each core practice in his/her particular school. Table 1 reports information about the Polish schools studied and their respective principals.

Table 1. Polish case-study summaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Ages</th>
<th>context</th>
<th>age</th>
<th>gender</th>
<th>years of experience</th>
<th>Years of Principal in school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>7-13</td>
<td>inner city</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>7-13</td>
<td>suburban</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower secondary</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>14-16</td>
<td>inner city</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower secondary</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>14-16</td>
<td>inner city</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The communities in which the schools function are very varied: there are areas which are occupied by families in difficult financial situation and there are also areas where the middle-class families live. Many of the pupils are brought up in single-parent families, in common-law families or in the unemployed families. This situation often results in dire straits and parental care problems. Many pupils come from families with three or more children and these families also have serious financial problems, as well as difficulty in obtaining a decent flat. They are often characterized by serious alcohol problems and families are under the supervision of a probation officer. The major challenges of the schools, especially during the first five years of principalship, were connected with:

- low students’ morale, low students’ discipline, and poor school attendance;
- low pupils’ academic results, and a low level of achievements;
- low students’ engagement in learning;
- low level of families’ engagement with the school life;
- the inadequate state of the school building and improper technological and teaching facilities in the school;
- poor public image of the school;
- lack of the culture of co-operation, collaboration within the school staff, and low staff morale.

Phases for improving schools

Conducting interviews for this research, it became apparent that there were at least two ‘phases’ for improving the examined schools. These phases are:

- a period of early improvement to functionality; followed by
- a period of maintaining functionality and seeking to secure further, sustained improvements in effectiveness.

Research findings show that since the beginning of the process of main school improvements such a key actions as:
- ‘fresh start’, to change the culture and expectations; and
- conduct a thorough review to identify the school’s key strong and weak points and to formulate a plan of school development have been essential to school improvement in every researched school

At the beginning of the process of school improvement all examined Principals were focused on:

- **Pupils and curriculum**: building powerful forms of teaching and learning: improved pastoral system, improved teaching and learning, extra-curricular initiatives, integrating pupils from different social and cultural environments and raising students’ level of achievements. Building students’ sense of responsibility for appropriate behavior and creating an environment in which students are likely to behave well (a safe, orderly environment).

- **Parents, governors and the community**
  Greater parental involvement and support, creating strong communities in school; nurturing the development of educational cultures in families; expanding the amount of students’ social capital valued by the schools, better links with the governing body, better links with school-community, school image improved.

- **Staff and management**
  Better trained staff, higher staff morale, improved communication, better teamwork, improved ethos, greater staff commitment, more effective use of finance and resources, clearer sense of purpose, improved planning and target setting.

A systematic work within these areas resulted in improving the quality of teaching: the teachers accepted the need to change their work, they felt better motivated to do their work, they were engaged in their job and it brought about a lot of good results.

In the next phase of every school growth, these above-mentioned changes in school life were continued and, as the Principals stressed, there were no one way for the school improvement. In order to achieve high academic results and integrate pupils there was/is a need as one of the Principal said:

.. to open various doors. I have never used any specific strategy for the school improvement. Rather I was keen on adopting a wide range of approaches and tried to integrate them to create a comprehensive strategy. But the issue is that for the whole time I and my teachers, we together, have paid attention for continuous improvements. We continually set goals to improve our school. (Principal 3)

The Principals demonstrate capacity to sustain the process of improvement in the underperforming school in challenging circumstances. They were aware of the fact that for improvement the school leadership teams were needed to implement good systems and processes in the school (e.g. behaviour, finances, attendance, environment) to restore the effective functionality of the school and simultaneously improve the culture of the school. In doing so they monitored the implementation of the plan carefully and hold regular reviews of progress and were clear about everybody’s role in the school’s leadership team, they had clear behaviours, tasks and targets for all.
**Effective strategies**

In general terms, research findings reveal several interconnected strategies that might be identified as being the most successful in raising achievement in the schools. Two of them related to:

- setting the directions: targeting an important, visible, attainable first goal;
- developing people, redesigning the organisation and changing the culture of the school;

**Setting the directions: targeting an important, visible, attainable first goal**

In the examined schools, our Principals walked into difficult environments with problems ranging from student discipline through teacher morale and parent dissatisfaction to academic lethargy. In response to what must have felt like overwhelming chaos, principals identified one issue or goal upon which they could focus their immediate attention and give an clear message that the schools were changing. They sought to identify issues where they could make progress quickly. The focus varied in response to the issues that were perceived as important at each school.

In examined lower-secondary schools, the first efforts were to improve student discipline and create a safe and orderly environment. In one of the primary school, efforts were made to increase the school’s focus on academic instruction. In each of the examined schools, principals tried to make the physical environment more attractive for children and more conducive to learning.

By targeting a visible, attainable goal, our researched Principals were able to give students, parents, and teachers unambiguous signs of change in just a few weeks or months. These early accomplishments helped to reduce or eliminate excuses for school failures and created readiness for further changes. By focusing on one issue, principals were able to direct their energies in a direction that would have a high likelihood of success. Foundation for the future schools’ successes were these first successes in every examined school.

As we can see, all the Principals, who took part in the research, set remarkably similar directions for their schools early in their tenures. These Principals expressed two simultaneous intentions. One of them was about securing the building and the other was connected with redefinition of the school focus on teaching and learning. One of the Principal said:

> I remember that the first thing I wanted to do was to clean the school up, bring order to chaos and make the school as a safe place where our children could spend time and learn and my teacher could teach. (Principal 1)

Our Principals told similar stories about how they would like to change the school environments and transformed the school to a learning place. Our Principals adopted the role of ‘curriculum leader’ where learning and teaching strategies were designed to match the needs and background of the students with the clear principle that all students could experience success. One of them said:

> Remembering the time, the time from the beginning of my principalship up to now, I can see how much important for all changes in my school was a development of a general philosophy of learning in the school. I tried to pay attention on curriculum and tried to be a curriculum leader. I was focused on my teaching and noticed that my teachers perceived me as an exemplary teacher. One time, my teachers said me that they had a chance to see and understand the excellence in teaching. (Principal 4)
The Principals are perceived by the teaching staff as an educational leaders who acts as a role model for good and successful teaching and learning. They can articulate a range of teaching strategies to other teachers, and they were able to do it with a passion. Our data show that the teachers respected their teaching expertise and were able to experience success through significant improvement in student achievements.

Our principal is a very good teacher. In my opinion thanks to her intrinsic features she is able to have a very special relationships with the students. Simply speaking, they follow her. And she is a model for us as teachers. She sees her job as vocation, she is focused on every student and the curriculum. She talks to every teacher in every day. She is passionate about the job, to make a difference to the children lives. (Teacher 2)

Principals were not only focused on academic achievements. They engaged themselves in other aspects of the students’ education, she takes care of the students’ leisure time, therefore they try to make a school a community centre and attract the students and their parents to the school.

Developing people, redesigning the organisation and changing the culture of the school

Our Principals faced challenging circumstances that required them to sort through complex set of competing factors in order to establish shared vision, priorities and strategies. All the participants in the study acknowledged their contribution to turning the school around first of all by changing the school culture and by eliminating students' behaviour problems.

Our Principals talked in detail about their efforts to change what they saw as being the culture of their school. They mainly described this in terms of changing values and beliefs, which involved establishing vision and setting direction, building relationships, strengthening morale and raising expectations.

The students and the parents noted how the school culture had changed from an aloof, unfriendly and somewhat violent environment to one that was nurturing and sociable, where the children were engaged in their learning.

She has done a lot to making this school one of the best primary schools in this area. Our school 14 years ago it had poor reputation. (Teacher 1)

I like to attend this school mainly because of its atmosphere. The school is very friendly and safe, there is aggression like in others schools. Our teachers do a lot for us, and we work well. We have a lot of extra-curriculum activities. (Student 1).

It is a safe school. The teachers care for our children. If they have any problems they go to them and they sort it out. The school does a lot for lifting up all students and to help families. The school provides the families in dire straits with special assistance, which as I noticed occurs in different forms. Sometimes it is the purchase of schoolbooks, sometimes the purchase of winter clothing. The school provides the families with meals, helps to organize winter and summer holiday rest for students or helps to organize various forms of spending leisure time by parents and students together. (Parent 3)

The teachers who had been at the examined schools since our Principals appointments were best able to describe all the changes in the school culture from negative to positive. One teacher who had witnessed the change described the change as a cultural one:
I started my work here when our principal were appointed, therefore I was able to observe all the changes in the school. And now I am proud of my school because it is one of the best in our region, but we started from the low level. We had problems with students’ discipline, students’ attendance, students’ academic achievements. Our improvements, especially those connected with the school culture, I mean the team work, co-operation among teachers, has occurred quite well. School have a much more better image in the community and it can attract youth, especially children with a high developmental potential. (Teacher 2)

In connection with this the most important issue about the changes within the school was about developing people and redesigning the school as an organisation.

A strategy for educational change that focus on the learning and achievement of students by enhancing classroom practice and do everything for supporting the teaching and learning process within the school. (Principal 2)

To begin the process of redesigning the school as an organisation, our Principals and their staff conducted an audit and reviewed the school’s strengths and weaknesses on each of the school effectiveness factors in order to establish priorities for the school developmental plan.

Our Principals were convinced that changing schools means changing people’s behaviours and attitudes as well as the school’s norms and organisation, which means that changing schools is about the change of school culture. In fact, it is a long process, and cannot be achieved, as one of the researched Principal said:

“a quick-fix solution”... I always was careful about introducing into my school practice too much new initiatives. The most important issue for school improvement is steady work, especially in these schools who work in disadvantaged areas, as my do. (Principal 1)

Principals placed a particular emphasis upon generating positive relationships with parents and fostering a view of the school as being part of rather than apart from the community, as being a resource of knowledge, wisdom rather the institution where children have to be sent.

This school is located in poor community, there is long term unemployment, low aspirations, high levels of crime and alcohol abuse. The biggest problem we had was getting the community to see us as a resource rather than the enemy – Principal; She is very concerned about the relationships between us, I see how much she done for us and how much she wants us to be involved in school life. (Parent 1)

Principals generated a high level of commitment in others through their openness, honesty and the quality of their inter-personal relationships. They started their leadership not from the basis of power and control but from their ability to act with teachers and to enable teachers to act.

From the beginning I paid attention on allowing and empowering my teachers, I wanted them to able to make decisions in school and to be autonomous. I hoped that it would help to change my teachers attitudes toward the changes. Now I see that they are less apathetic and less resistant to change. (Principal)

Our Principal is a leader who is authentic, she is able to inspire us. It’s very interesting, how she manages to do it. I think she is believable, she is spiritually aware, credible, earthly, practical, and, strives to be ethical and caring. (Teacher A)

The Principals’ leadership styles were seen, especially by teachers and parents, as an important factor that contributed to the every school improvement and success. Whilst their leadership was
not described as autocratic, there was a single-minded determination based upon a clear conviction of the best way in which to proceed. One of the examined teacher said:

Our principal has a passion and ideas of students’ success. She is very determined on school improvement in order to help as much as possible every child to fulfill his/her potentials. She exactly knows where she wants the school to go. Even though she, similarly to other principals in our country, does not have the adequate support from the community and local school government, she is able to keep going on her own way. I think, she is a heroic leader. (Teacher 3)

During the interviews parents and teachers acknowledged Principals humanistic, enthusiastic, energetic and direct leadership style. They appreciated the way their opinions were valued and incorporated into the decision making process. Principals were seen as people who are able to maintain open lines of communication, and respond to the suggestions of others. This helps to foster trust and loyalty and assisted them to implement into practice school vision.

She is always interested in our opinion, she encourages us to give her feedback. And then she considers the best solution. (Teacher 4)

I appreciate her ability to establish the good communication between us as parents and her. She is always available and have something outstanding in herself. She makes people feel easy, comfortable, people want to work with her. She relies a lot on our feedback. If we have a problem, she is very approachable. She has a special ability to reflect on her actions and management. She constantly improve the way she is a principal. (Parent 3)

In conclusion, we can say that our Principals are strong educational leaders. They have strongly articulated beliefs about teaching and learning, have high expectations and a vision for the school that means every student can perform quite well, especially those students who are from disadvantaged backgrounds. They take care of establishing a safe school environment. They work closely with students, staff and parents; and give time to all that need it, with particular emphasis on supporting teaching staff to enable them to do their best.

Discussion and conclusion

Over the last seventeen years, the range of policies aimed at raising standards in Polish has intensified. In particular, the introduction of performance targets has brought greater pressure to increase levels of attainment amongst students, especially at 13+ and 16+, where national examination results offer a measure that allows some aspects of school performance to be compared. However, despite continuing gains in overall attainment levels, there remain a number of schools in difficult urban context, where progress has been difficult to secure. Yet there are schools that appear to demonstrate that it is in fact possible to break out of the cycle of low expectations and achievements. These are schools facing challenging circumstances that have succeeded in increasing and sustaining achievement levels over time. This study was focused on such schools. Specifically, it examined progress in a sample of Polish schools in which progress has been sustained in order to learn more about factors that are associated with success. In this way the Author hoped to provide some assistance to those who take on task of leading such schools.

The process of the reform of the Polish educational system achieved various development stages in the consecutive phases of this systemic transformation taking place in the years 1989-2008.
While looking closer at planned, introduced, rejected and disputed reforms prepared by the governments, one can notice a clear lack of any regularity or accumulation of experiences, and a constant conflict between the supporters of the autonomy, decentralization and denationalization of the education and their adversaries.

Until recently Polish researchers have taken very little direct interest in schools in difficult circumstances. So far, school improvement researchers have tended to work with the schools that already have a track record of innovation. Similarly, most school effectiveness research has focused upon successful schools, leading to a deficit explanation of those that are less successful. Some researchers have focused on schools that are seen to be failing in order to find ways of helping to restore these schools to health. In this paper I looked more specifically at the tasks of leadership in Polish schools facing challenging circumstances. Provided analysis has to be seen in the context of the extensive reform efforts that have been introduced by Polish government since 1989. These have been characterized on the one hand by more autonomous system of education (each school is administered locally and possesses a high degree of autonomy; each school has a high degree of control over its own decisions and destiny), and on the other hand by a determination to raise educational standards, a quest to undertake the modernization of educational system, its’ structure and practices, and a commitment to diversity within education: the basis for this is the conviction that a market approach will lead to greater efficiency and higher standards.

Research findings from the Leading Schools Successfully in Challenging Urban Context project revealed the powerful impact of leadership in securing school development and change. Case studies of schools that served children who are from low-income families, especially those that succeeded beyond expectations and provided detailed portraits of leadership. Findings from these study are intended primarily to be descriptive and not necessarily transferable to other contexts. As it was a small-scale study, the possibilities for generalization are inevitably limited. Nevertheless, the richness of data collected, together with the perceptions of numerous stakeholders, i.e. senior managers, middle managers, teachers, pupils, parents, which took part in the project, offers a rich empirical basis for exploring leadership practice in schools facing challenging contexts. The findings show a remarkable degree of commonality demonstrating that the core aspects of successful school leadership can be identified in ways that can help explain the complexity of principal leadership that leads to improved student outcomes in schools, which took part in the research. We can state that collectively, these studied schools demonstrate what look to be indications of promising progress in relation to sustainable school improvement. On the one hand there are certainly common ingredients within the strategies that have led to school improvement; and on the other hand solutions, which each of the school has for solving the problems, tend to be individual and context specific.

The evidence is sufficient to suggest that existing theories of leadership only partially reflect or explain the current approaches to leadership in schools facing challenging contexts. It is suggested that the demands that schools facing challenging contexts place upon leaders requires them to have a broad range of leadership approaches underpinned by a core set of values and a strong moral purpose. The findings from the Polish part of the Leading Schools Successfully in Challenging Urban Context project highlight that effective leadership is defined and driven by individual value systems rather than external demands or managerial concerns. Although the
heads were at different stages in their careers as well as of different ages and different experiences, a number of common themes emerged. Across the four Polish schools, which were involved in the study, it was evident that their had adopted particular strategies for improvement. The combination of these strategies was dependent on the particular context and circumstance of the school but in each case there was evidence that a number of these strategies had been successfully put in place and had made a positive difference.

All the Principals, who took part in the study, were experiencing increased accountability, higher expectations for students performance, external policies which were imposed without consultation and support, as well as significant changes that have challenged their leadership practices. In spite of these challenges, it was discovered that all four Polish Principals might be described as the exemplary leaders who had set and maintained a direction for their schools and had a strong, positive influence on their staff, students, parents willingness to follow their lead. More specifically, each Principal initiated change in school life and their first, important achievement was to move the school community on, beyond the ‘helplessness’, into the realization that things could and must change. In all the cases, the starting point was with staff and physical environment. Most often this point was described in terms of ‘raising expectations’. The Principals were able to enlarge the staff’s capacity to imagine what might be achieved, and increase their sense of accountability for bringing this about. The evidence suggests that Principals, who were studied, knew that if people were expected to improve, they needed opportunities to build their capacity necessary to succeed. This first step was seen as the most difficult.

The case studies suggest that Principals who lead schools successfully in challenging urban contexts draw upon the same basic repertoire of leadership attributes and practices but the ways they apply these – not the attributes and practices themselves – demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work. The strategies that have been highlighted in the previous section need to be seen as a bank of ideas that may help Principals who work in schools in challenging urban contexts to develop their own actions. It is worth mentioning that these strategies may not be treated as a ‘list’ of things to do.

It is important to note that all studied schools were rather schools of small size. Although school size was not a focus of this study, the Author of the study believes that it may have impact on Principals effectiveness, and especially on Principal’s ability to redesign the organization and communicate with the community. The smaller faculty, the more opportunities for developing closer, individual relationships between principals and school staff. A growing body of research indicates that children benefit from smaller schools due to the increased likelihood of having a much more personal, deeper relationship with adults.

**Implications for further research**

This research raises question about leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances. The transferability of leadership approaches to different school contexts is debatable and therefore is worthy of further exploration. It would be interesting to know, for example, how far these findings resonate with leaders in a larger sample of schools in challenging contexts; if, and to what extent, the leadership approaches and practices in schools in challenging circumstances translate
to schools in more affluent circumstances. The issue of the relationship between school context and leadership is one that requires more investigation.

Although we have an understanding of the core practices principals need to lead schools successfully in challenging urban contexts, we know less about how school improvement and the leadership practices that support it evolve over time, especially the skills needed to sustain improvement. Thus, research into leading schools successfully in challenging urban contexts needs a longitudinal component to better understand the process of improvement, the kinds of thinking and action needed in schools facing challenging circumstances.

REFERENCES


Improving the Quality of Teacher Education, European Commission, August 2007.


