Reflections on Researching Successful School Leadership in Australia

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Abstract
The Australian education context is characterised by increasing public scrutiny of school performance and an expectation that all schools should, within contextual boundaries, produce high level student outcomes. Whilst discussion of successful schools and successful school leadership is a relatively recent phenomenon, it is now an important concept for research, policy and practice. This paper reports on our research in developing an Australian model of successful school leadership, and associated research areas of instructional leadership, sustainable leadership, and leadership preparation. It is a paper that describes the research agenda of two Australian educational researchers as they explore successful school leadership over a ten-year period.

Introduction
Australia is in the grip of a new era of school performance accountability. In all states and territories, and at the federal government level, there is considerable interest in developing successful schools in all contexts, for all students. Drivers for this focus include increased accountability (both locally and increasingly internationally through PISA, TIMMS, and OECD country comparisons), competition between the public, Catholic and independent sectors, tensions between the state/territory and federal governments, greater knowledge as to what works in schools, and, above all, a desire to provide successful schools. What this environment is doing is focusing attention on school leadership, and that of principals in particular.

Successful school leadership can be defined, as in the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP), in terms of peer reputation, student learning outcomes (these can be narrowly or broadly defined), and external review (such as a school review). The study of both successful schools and the leadership that helps to foster this has a relatively short history in Australia (the following is taken from Gurr, 2009), beginning with the pioneering research of Walker at the University of New England (Walker, 1966) and Bassett at The University of Queensland (Bassett, Crane and Walker, 1963, 1967). At the start of the eighties research emerged which heralded a 25-year interest in successful school leadership. Beginning with a major study of Australian school principals - The Australian School Principal: A National Study (Duignan et al., 1985) - that provided a model relating principal role to improved student learning, a research path can be traced through:

• A book on principals and change that connected with the emerging school effectiveness and improvement research fields to explicitly explore how school leadership could lead to improved student learning outcomes – Principal and Change: The Australian Experience. (Simpkins, Thomas and Thomas, 1987).
• A synthesis of the school effectiveness and improvement literature focused on school success - Creating an Excellent School (Beare, Caldwell and Millikan, 1989).

• A major Australian-wide survey of parent, student, teacher, principals and school community views of effective schools – The Australian Effective Schools Project (McGaw, Piper, Banks, & Evans, 1993a, 1993b).

• A large survey-based study exploring leadership, organisational learning and student outcomes - Leadership for Organisational Learning and Student Outcomes (LOLSO) (Mulford and Silins, 2003, Mulford, Silins and Leithwood, 2004).

• Exploration of middle-level leadership through case-studies of 50 secondary school subject departments and cross-school programs – An Exceptional Schooling Outcomes Project (ÆSOP) (Dinham, 2005, 2007).

• An extensive and on-going school improvement project that has developed a framework for establishing professional learning communities to improve school outcomes — Initiating, Discovering, Envisioning, Actioning and Sustaining (IDEAS) (Andrews et al., 2004; Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002; Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, 2009; Lewis & Andrews, 2007).

• Several small-scale case studies of successful school leadership exploring innovation and success (Dimmock and O’Donoghue, 1997), market-centred leadership (Drysdale, 2001, 2002), and leadership of a successful Christian school (Twelves, 2005).

• Publication and distribution to all Australian schools of a book of seventeen stories about the exhilaration of being a principal, with all the principals highly regarded and successful school leaders – Leading Australia’s Schools (Duignan and Gurr, 2007).

• As part of the ISSPP (see: Leithwood & Day, 2007; Journal of Educational Administration, 43(6), 2005; International Studies in Educational Administration, 35(3), 2007), Drysdale, Gurr and Mulford have conducted 14 multiple perspective case studies of successful principals, and surveys of principals and teachers – [Discussion of the case studies can be found in: Drysdale, 2007; Gurr, 2007a, 2008; Gurr & Drysdale, 2007, 2008; Gurr, Drysdale, & Mulford, 2006, 2007; Gurr et al., 2003; Mulford & Johns, 2004. Tasmanian survey data have been reported in Ewington et al., (2008), and Mulford et al., 2008.]. Currently, the principals and schools from the Victorian case studies are being re-visited to explore the sustainability of success, findings of which are reported below.

This paper reflects on our research agenda over the past ten years of involvement with the ISSPP through exploring briefly several of our research areas associated with the concept of successful school leadership, including an Australian model of successful school leadership, the role of instructional leadership, sustainability of success, and the preparation of future school leaders.
Successful School Leadership Model

Models have been a central feature of mainstream management and leadership theory and research for over fifty years, and whether simple or complex, they are constructed to make sense of complex research. In the ISSPP there are now more than 80 multiple perspective case studies. The Australian researchers in this group have been at the forefront of trying to represent the complexity of the case studies through the development of a model based upon the 14 Australian multiple-perspective case studies (see, Gurr, Drysdale and Mulford, 2006). The model of successful school leadership is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Simplified Australian Model of Successful School Leadership

In this model, principals and others in leadership roles, exert an influence on broadly conceived student and school outcomes (Mulford, 2007) through a focus on teaching and learning which is driven by their own values and vision, an agreed school vision, elements of transformational leadership (individual support and commitment, critical reflection, modelling of appropriate values, beliefs and behaviours), a focus on increasing school capacity across four dimensions (personal, professional, organisational and community), taking into account and working within the larger school context, and using evidence-based monitoring and critical reflection to lead to change and transformation. The school capacities of level 2 each have four elements (what is termed a four by four (4X4) approach to capacity building because a piece of 4X4 is a piece of wood that is used as a strong structural element in building):

- **Personal capacity** - self management; professional networks; individual professional pedagogy; knowledge creation and construction;
- **Professional capacity** - professional infrastructure; teachers as leaders; professional learning teams; school-wide pedagogy;  
- **Organisational capacity** - distributed leadership; culture of organisational learning; organisational structures; building a safe environment; and  
- **Community capacity** – social capital; community networks and alliances; parent-school partnerships; relationship marketing.

This model is complex but provides some guidance as to how school leaders can help improve student outcomes, especially through capacity building to promote teacher effectiveness. The next stage of research is to gather further empirical evidence to confirm and/or modify this model, and to provide a model that is more widely applicable to school leaders other than principals.

**Instructional Leadership**

One of the points of interest for the ISSPP has been the extent to which principals exercise instructional leadership and the manner in which this is enacted (Gurr, Drysdale and Mulford, 2007; Ylimaki, Gurr, Drysdale, Moos and Kofod, in preparation). In this section we provide a brief overview of the concept of instructional leadership and then describe three of our successful principals who demonstrate different ways of being instructional leaders.

The concept of ‘instructional leadership’ has had a long history. Its origins can be traced back to the 19th century under the inspection systems that existed in North America, England and Australia. It rose to prominence again in the United States in the 1970s when the instruction dimension of the role of the principal was emphasised. By the eighties there was considerable focus on researching the instructional leadership role of the principal and Murphy (1990) articulated an enduring definition that included:

- developing mission and goals  
- managing the educational production function  
- promoting an academic learning climate  
- developing a supportive work environment

The Australian case studies of the ISSPP confirmed the generally accepted finding that mostly instructional leadership is indirect, working through teachers to influence student outcomes (Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Walstrom and Anderson, 2010). These principals were operating at level 2 of the model shown in Figure 1. But there were exceptions, with one principal in particular exerting a very direct form of instructional leadership, operating at level 1 and level 2. Gurr, Drysdale and Mulford (2007) described the work of three principals, which is summarised below to gain a sense of the subtlety of the indirect/direct influence argument.
**Vicki Forbes**

Vicki was the principal of a large Victorian secondary school. Vicki demonstrated an indirect form of instructional leadership and one in which much of her effort was focussed on level two initiatives. She had a clear vision, high expectations, fostered a positive and supportive culture, supported innovative teaching and learning, was good at attracting and retaining the right staff, built positive relationships with the school community, fostered professional capacity building, and showed leadership that ‘walked the talk’.

**Margaret Church**

Margaret was the principal of a small Tasmanian primary school. She displayed an indirect form of instructional leadership, one that was centred on work within level 2, with some elements of level 3. There was also a strong emphasis at looking at student outcomes broadly. Success at Margaret’s school was due to a committed and focused staff, and to a principal who was similarly committed and focused, a good role model, and a strong and purposeful leader. She worked to change teaching practice from a disengaged, child-minding style, to one with high expectation and purposeful learning. She also operated at a political level to both challenge and engage the Education Department to support the school.

**John Fleming**

John was the principal of a small Victorian primary school. A clear learning and social framework, backed by research evidence, practical experience, and a combination of presence, passion and energy, allowed John to create an aligned and energised learning community, one in which students were able to do their best. He had a clear vision and established excellent school community alignment, managed the educational production function in a very hands-on manner, had high expectations about academic learning, and was expert at developing a supportive work climate. He was a very hands-on and direct instructional leader operating at both level 2 and 1.

All three principals centred their efforts at level 2. The principals’ values, beliefs and vision were clear, understood and supported by all in the school community, and were used to drive improvement. John had perhaps the most clearly articulated and integrated view of teaching and learning, whilst Margaret had very strong social justice values, and Vicki saw the need to work with and through staff. They emphasised the importance of developing relationships, particularly the interactions they had with students as this sent important messages to the students about the sort of values, beliefs and behaviours that would help them succeed. John had a more direct influence on students within classrooms than the other principals. The three principals worked well with staff, understanding them as individuals and helping them to develop their personal and professional capacities. Again, John seemed to have a more direct impact on classroom instruction, yet both Vicki and Margaret were effective in improving the quality of instruction, curriculum and assessment. Margaret worked well within the broader context (level 3), especially in buffering the staff and students from anything that did not fit her and the school’s clearly articulated and communicated objectives. John, was the most direct leader of the three in that he spent a lot of time in classrooms working with teachers and students to improve the teaching and learning.

All three principals were clearly influential (indeed, most in the school communities believed that the success of these schools was largely due to the efforts of the principals), yet Vicki and Margaret worked more through others to influence teachers, student and parents to influence student outcomes, whilst John was more directly involved, working in classrooms often. This is encouraging for those that are, or
aspire to be, principals as it is clear that there are many pathways to attaining outstanding student outcomes. In other words, the three case studies demonstrate that educational leadership makes a difference in different ways. This finding is supported in the cross-nation analysis of Ylimaki, Gurr, Drysdale and Moos (forthcoming). Comparing the instructional leadership in Australia, Denmark and the USA suggests that successful instructional leadership involves both direct and indirect practices, and the balance of direct-indirect leadership is influenced and shaped by the context in which it occurs. Again, there is no 'one way' to be a successful leader, and good leadership is about responding to and influencing the context. What was clear across the countries was that the principals all defined success broadly, were concerned with promoting social equity and authentic curriculum for the whole child, and all were deeply committed to contextually sensitive democratic participation and community development.

Leadership Sustainability

The notion of sustainability has become in recent years a popular concept. It is, of course, most often associated with ecologically sustainable development as evidenced by debates on climate change, environmental degradation, and the capacity of biologically systems to endure. As with many maturing concepts, the application of the concept widens to a point where it seems that it can be applied almost to anything and everything, including educational leadership (Blankstein, Houston and Cole, 2009; Davies, 2007; Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves and Fink, 2006). In this section we explore the conceptual confusion surrounding leadership sustainability, and then report on two of our successful principals who have sustained school success over an extended period.

Currently in the educational leadership literature there is little consensus about the concept of leadership sustainability. Davies' (2007) book of collected chapters from eminent writers in educational leadership illustrates this. Each contributor applies the concept to their own research agenda and knowledge, with the orientations so different that it confirms the view that sustainable leadership is conceptually at an early stage of development. A few examples serve to illustrate this. Hargreaves and Fink (2007) build their approach based on environmental and corporate sustainability literature. Day and Schmidt (2007) associate sustainability with resilience. Caldwell (2007) uses the perceptions of school leaders to explore how they foster a sense of exhilaration to sustain their leadership. Fullan and Sharratt (2007) use their work on a district-wide literacy reform to argue for the importance of sustaining leadership as a continuous force for improvement. Deal (2007) takes a different position and outlines that education has a remarkable capacity for sustaining the status quo. Hopkins (2007) focuses on system level change and sustainability. A similar pattern of conceptual ambiguity emerges in Blankstein, Houston & Cole's (2009) edited book, Building Sustainable Leadership Capacity. Again there are a variety of approaches by the contributors, as shown by the following examples. Sparks (2009) argues that sustainability cannot be enduring without teamwork and professional learning. Lambert (2009) questions what happens after leaders leave the school. Her answer is reciprocal leadership, learning communities and leading networks. Fullan (2009) argues that for sustainability there needs to be moral purpose that is translated into reality. Fink (2009) notes that today's leaders need to cope with outmoded structures and simultaneously lead schools to become learning communities. While these perspectives maybe interesting they do not point to a consensus concerning a research agenda and leave sustainable leadership as a concept in need of development.
In Australia, through the ISSPP, Goode, Drysdale and Gurr (2009) report on the leadership of Jan Shrimpton at Morang South Primary School, and Bella Irlicht at Port Phillip Specialist School, both schools in Victoria. Jan was first visited Jan 2004, and then again in 2008. Bella Irlicht at Port Phillip Specialist School (for earlier reports on Bella’s leadership see: Gurr and Drysdale, 2003; Gurr, Drysdale and Mulford, 2006; Gurr, Drysdale, Di Natale, Ford, Hardy and Swann, 2003) was first visited in 2003 and then again in 2009. The paper describes the important interactions between internal and external change forces and the role of the principal as a precursor to sustainability of school success and also her success as a leader. For both schools, despite political, educational and demographics changes over the five or more years since they were first visited, South Morang Primary School maintained its performance, while Port Phillip Specialist School continued to improve significantly. The findings show that school success in both cases was largely due to the principal, and in particular, their leadership style, personal values, and strategic interventions. An important variable though in why one school continued to improve, was the principals’ attitude to change. At South Morang Primary School, where successful performance was maintained, the principal was controlled by change events. As with the findings of Giles and Hargreaves (2006) and Hargreaves and Goodson (2006), system reforms, demographic changes and the natural changes in the life cycle of the school had impacted on this school. Whilst the school was able to maintain its overall performance (which is in itself a significant achievement), it was not able to progress to a higher level of performance. At Port Phillip Specialist School, where the school continued to improve upon its history of success, the principal controlled the change events to the school’s advantage. In both cases internal and external change challenged past success but the principals were able to accommodate the impact. Jan was described as a Restorer-BUILDER - she turned the school around and built a good school that maintained success in the face of external and internal changes. Bella was described as a Driver-BUILDER - she drove improvement through promoting change. She used the similar external and internal changes that had led to a plateau on improvement at South Morang Primary School as an opportunity to create further improvement.

Leadership Preparation

One of the important considerations arising from our research of successful school leadership is how to develop successful leaders. After a brief review of leadership preparation in Australia, we describe the leadership development pathway of three of our successful principals.

In Australia, a four-year teaching qualification and registration are the only formal requirements for school leaders. This places Australia at odds with countries such as England, or many of the school districts in the USA, which have licensure requirements, often satisfied through graduate study programs. Whilst higher qualifications are not mandatory in Australia, possession of such qualifications may lead to promotion to leadership roles (Anderson, Kleinhenz, Mulford and Gurr, 2008). For example, an internal evaluation of the 160 participants in the first four cohorts of the Master of School Leadership at The University of Melbourne, suggested between 29 to 50% had gained a formal promotion during the duration of the program (Anderson and Gurr, 2008). Whilst these figures are impressive, the case for graduate qualifications relies more on belief than empirical evidence of effect. For example, Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe and Meyerson (2005) found that leadership preparation programs in the USA tended to be research-based, had curricular coherence, provided experience in authentic contexts, used cohort groupings and mentors, and enabled collaborative activity between the program and area schools. There were multiple pathways for leadership development described
with programs run by universities, districts, third party providers, and in partnerships between stakeholders. Importantly, they noted that there was a paucity of evidence about the efficacy of the different programs, which their on-going research program has only partially addressed (see Darling-Hammond, LaPonte, Meyerson and Orr, 2007). So, whilst there are many stakeholder groups offering programs, and there seems to be agreement on the features required of these programs, the evidence of effectiveness is weak.

School leadership development in Australia has for too long relied on an apprenticeship model in which aspiring school leaders gain the necessary skill and experience on-the-job as they moved up the ranks to the principal class (Su, Gamage and Miniberg, 2003). The findings of the ISSPP in Australia confirm this, with principals describing pathways that did not include formal requirements to gain knowledge outside of the school experience. However, what is evident with these successful principals is that they were all intellectually restless and actively sought new ideas to supplement their significant on-the-job training. The pathways they chose varied and three examples are used to illustrate this.

Vicki Forbes
Vicki was very career oriented. She set her sights to become principal early in her career. To achieve her goals she planned meticulously. Every experience was a learning experience. She planned her career and served her time as an assistant principal in high achieving schools. She applied for a number of principal positions before being successful in gaining Brentwood College. After each application she reflected and planned the next application making sure she researched the school she was applying for in order to get the best fit. She was deliberate in her strategy, continuously clarifying her vision and philosophy. It was only after she received her appointment as a principal that she embarked on a Masters in Educational Management. It demonstrated her quest for learning, but also her striving for perfection. She believed the formal qualification was important for her role and that it would enhance her credibility. Vicki is an example of someone with the personal drive, motivation, and determination to be a successful principal. Vicki always engaged in a significant amount of professional reading and reflection, and she continues on a learning journey by participating in professional learning programs both within the education department and through professional associations such as the Australian Council of Educational Leaders (of which she is a Fellow).
Jan Shrimpton

Jan’s preparation for the principalship was based on her developing a personal leadership style, having a strong motivation to do well, participation in formal and informal professional learning programs, and the development of the ability to establish strong interpersonal relationships. She also built on her experience and developed a strong set of values.

Jan liked a challenge. She was drawn to the schools in the most challenging circumstances and she succeeded in taking on the toughest of assignments. It was at this stage that she started to develop a personal educational philosophy and set of values. They were based on her belief in making a difference with students of disadvantage. She believed that every child had the right to develop to their potential. Jan also had a love for learning and participated in as many formal and informal programs as possible. While she was a regional Student Welfare consultant she participated in a six-week intensive residential program run by the Institute of Educational Administration. She explained how the program was life changing and gave her the confidence to stretch herself to take on the role of principal. Immediately after attending the course, Jan applied and was appointed as principal in school which she said was ‘out of control’. Putting together her educational philosophy, learning, experience and newly acquired confidence, she took on the role believing that if she could bring the staff together as a team it would make a difference. Soon after taking up the role of principal she initiated a school merger and created a new school identity. Subsequently, she was asked by the Education Department to move to another school in challenging circumstances, South Morang Primary School; it was her work at this school that was investigated as part of the ISSPP. Throughout her time as principal she continued to engage in professional learning and networking. Jan retired in 2008 only to be recalled by the Education Department to lead yet another school in difficult circumstances.

Bella Irlicht

Bella Irlicht had been principal of this special school for students with multiple disabilities since 1986. During her time she achieved extraordinary things for the school and students. When she retired in 2009 she had transformed the school from a small school in a converted home with less than 20 students into a magnificent facility with an innovative curriculum and a world-wide reputation with 150 students. She was recognised with numerous awards including the Order of Australia (OA), CEO of the Year for Not For Profit Organisations, and Fellowship of the Australain Council for Educational Leaders.

In her time as principal Bella gained several formal qualifications including a Masters in Education, and Graduate Diplomas in Educational Administration, Curriculum, and Student Welfare. She travelled within Australia and overseas, and engaged in numerous professional learning programs. She was a superb networker, sought the counsel of many experts, and in her tenth year as principal engaged a coach, ahead of a trend to coaching that is now only gaining momentum.

The qualifications supported her knowledge and skill base, but it was her drive, determination, high expectations, and entrepreneurial spirit that were identified as the drivers of her success. She was described as a ‘visionary doer’. It was not clear to what extent the courses, programs, and experiences added to the personal qualities and characteristics that distinguished her as a principal, but certainly her personal mission to make a difference to the lives of students with disabilities was influential. An example of how her combination of her inner drive to create a world-class school, and her quest for new knowledge helped the school is shown in a study tour she did in the 1990s to explore the concept of fully serviced schools. This trip was made...
possible through gaining a Fulbright Scholarship, the support of the Education Department, and her contacts with people such as Professor Caldwell at The University of Melbourne. The result of this trip was that she returned and created a school that now provides an extensive range of additional services such as physiotherapy and dental treatment on-site. Her continuing success as a principal can be attributed to her ongoing personal and professional learning – Bella epitomises the idea of life-long learning.

Summary
In the preparation stories of these principals one aspect to note is that the system in which these principals forged their careers has changed. Across Australia, credentialing and mandatory programs for principalship preparation are still not regulated or legislated by governments or educational systems. However, what has changed is a recognition that unless systems prepare and foster a new generation of principals, the education systems will be in crisis (Anderson, Kleinhenz, Mulford & Gurr, 2008). The process is no longer ad hoc and dependent on an individual’s own ability to carve out their career. Education systems have developed a raft of programs including formal and informal programs, coaching, mentoring, and shadowing programs, regional based programs, internships and leave to attend international conferences and programs. The state of Victoria, in which these three principals work, has over the last decade developed a comprehensive leadership development program that has been described in an OECD review as ‘an outstanding example of large-scale reform...at the cutting edge’ (Matthews, Moorman and Nusche, 2007, p. 28). This climate is very different from the experiences of our successful school leaders, yet there are several features of these principals that are relevant for aspiring school leaders today:

• No matter what training and support is in place, personal motivation matters.
• The successful principals in this study had a love for learning and participated in whatever formal or informal programs were available.
• The principals had a strong career orientation and they accepted personal responsibility for their development to create their own future.
• They demonstrated ‘self-leadership’ working from the ‘inside-out’. They developed personally by reflecting on their practice and learning through experience.
• The principals established a set of values and principles that guided their actions.
• They fully engaged in networks and regional and state committees of various kinds to offer their expertise, and to gain from the experience.

Many of these are personal qualities and characteristics, and the question is can these be fostered and enhanced through the new preparation programs being established today?
Conclusion

The ISSPP provided an opportunity to conduct extensive research into successful schools and the successful principals that lead these schools in a wide range of countries, including Australia. For the Australian researchers it has provided the data to create a model that helps explain the phenomenon (Figure 1). Principals can directly and indirectly influence student outcomes. They can help set the educational agenda, influence teaching and learning, and build school capacity. The model (Figure 1) has been developed to achieve three objectives:

• to describe, explain and categorise various kinds of leadership interventions and outline their relationship and impact on student outcomes;

• to provide a conceptual map of the interventions used by the school’s leadership; and

• to provide a framework for other practitioners to use as a guide to future action, including principal preparation.

The model also has applicability to other leaders in schools, with for example, middle-level leaders such as curriculum area leaders, able to use the level two interventions to help improve classroom practice.

While the model (Figure 1) has been modified over time with new data, there is potential for further refinement based on the other three areas of research outlined in this paper: instructional leadership, sustainability of success, and principal preparation. For example, with instructional leadership, the model does indicate the type of interventions required by leaders, but does not explain the complex interaction between the leader characteristics, the situation and the interventions. In terms of principal preparation, the model can provide an agenda for training and development purposes by identifying the interventions necessary to build school capacity. The model has the potential to include more of the personal qualities, characteristics and value systems identified with successful school leadership. Evidence from our sustainability research indicates the important roles that principals have in sustaining school success (and therefore their own success). Our model indicates what interventions might modify the impact of external and internal change forces on the school which might impact on the sustainability of success. It does not explain why these interventions work in some circumstances and not in others, but there are clue in our sustainability research, such as the importance of the principals’ attitude to change as indicated at Port Phillip Specialist School (Goode, Drysdale and Gurr, 2009).

For future research we want to expand the exploration of successful school leadership to neighbouring countries to complement earlier research of ours in Indonesia (Raihani, 2006; Raihani and Gurr, 2006); to this end we are currently conducting case studies of successful school leadership in Singapore. We have a further principal that we will revisit from the original Victorian case studies, and we are currently re-considering our successful school leadership model in light of our sustainable leadership research. Exploring the applicability of the successful school leadership model in other Australian contexts will be important, and this may be done by the construction of an appropriate survey. Future case study research will be more involving of the whole school, reflecting recent research on how leadership can be dispersed in schools (Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Walstrom, & Anderson, 2010). An extension of the idea of successful school leadership, and important in a context of rapid and continuous change, will be to explore especially innovative schools and the leadership that fosters innovative climates (Dimmock and O’Donoghue, 1997).

References


