Culture, influence and (school) leader development

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The purpose of this paper is to stimulate discussion of the influence of culture of school leader development. I begin by reasserting that leaders make a difference in schools; that the context within which they lead makes a difference to *how* they lead, and that culture forms an important part of this context. While acknowledging the multifaceted hyper-complexity that typifies all school leaders' lives regardless (Moos, 2005), it is suggested that cultural value sets have a potent influence on leaders in different societies. If we accept the influence of culture on why and how school leadership is exercised, then it is axiomatic that it must impact on how we conceptualize structure and run leader development programs (LDPs).

The paper has five main sections. The first section sets out the basic argument for studying the influence of culture on school leadership. It also illustrates the growing interest in the area. The second section focuses justification specifically on culture and leader development. In the third section I attempt to illustrate the influence of culture on leader development and relate it, in turn, to content-based and community-based approaches. In the fourth section I offer five general propositions which may inform those interested in school leader development across societies. Among the propositions is a reminder that a focus on societal culture does not imply that other external and personal factors do not influence what leaders do. The final section outlines a number of issues pertinent to researching the influence of culture.

The influence of culture on school leadership[1]

Underpinning assumptions: Schools, regardless of their location or situation, require good leadership and management. What this entails, and indeed what it looks like, however, differs in important ways across and between different societies and cultures. Awareness that leadership may be conceptualized differently in diverse contexts has prompted calls for more explicit analysis of leadership using wider lenses, such as societal culture (Bajunid, 1996; Cheng, 1995a; Dimmock & Walker, 1998a; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996).

The merit of investigating leadership from a cultural or cross-cultural perspective rests on at least three basic, interrelated assumptions. The first is that leadership makes a difference in schools, even as we remain unsure of exactly how this works. This assumption is founded on international literature that confirms the centrality of leadership to school improvement and quality schooling; and that it most effectively influences school outcomes indirectly through multiple variables (Hallinger & Heck, 1999; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and

Hopkins, 2006; Southworth, 2005). It is also now widely accepted that how leaders make a difference is contingent upon (but not dictated by) the context within which they lead.

The second assumption therefore is that multiple contexts influence how school leaders lead. In other words, what leaders do is mediated and moderated by both their personal internal states as well as the organizational and external milieu of the school (Leithwood et al. 2006; Cheung & Walker, 2006). This context is not only complex, but is also constantly evolving in response to factors such as personality, ethnicity, gender, politics, history, economics and culture (Rizvi, 1997). The interplay between these value sets plays out in an assortment of forms in schools as leaders attempt to make sense of what is needed.

Third, given that leadership is centrally concerned with the interpretation and enactment of values, it is fair to assume that one influential factor on how leadership is conceptualized and exercised is the cultural values, norms and beliefs which help to define the group or society within which they live and work. Although a contested construct, culture can be broadly defined as patterns of shared values, beliefs and norms held by a particular group and/or society which combine in various ways to influence behavior and action.

Acceptance that culture matters, however, as with leader effects, still leaves us unsure just how much it matters – this will probably never be definitively resolved. However, the bottom line is that even though cultural values exist within a complex and vibrant globalizing context, they continue to exert an influence on people's lives (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004). As such, they form a key element of the environment within which leaders lead and, on how they lead.

> *While we acknowledge that global communication, technical innovation and industrialization can create a milieu for cultural change, a convergence among cultural values is by no means assured. In fact, cultural differences among societies may be exacerbated as they adapt to modernization while simultaneously striving to preserve their cultural heritage*. (Dorfman, Hanges & Broadbeck, 2004, p. 709)

Recognition of influence: Calls specifically for greater recognition of the influence of macro-societal cultural values on school leadership across different societies arrived in the mid-1990s. These followed widespread recognition of the link between school leadership and organizational culture, the important sway context held over successful school leadership, and the analytical properties societal culture held for expanding understanding in the field (Cheng, 1995a & b; Dimmock & Walker 1998, Hallinger, 1995 and Walker, Bridges & Chan, 1996). Four basic questions captured the essence of the initial arguments.

- Is the wholesale acceptance of Western educational practices appropriate to their national goals?
- Are the educational practices they have adopted from the West consistent with and sustaining of their cultural heritage?
- What are their own intellectual traditions and indigenous approaches to education and cultural transmission?
- How does the indigenous knowledge embedded in their culture fit with the theories, assumptions, and practices embedded in our Western-derived educational programs? (Bajunid, 1996 cited in Hallinger and Leithwood, 1996)

Recent work has asserted the influence of societal culture on school leadership and organization in a variety of ways (Dimmock & Walker, 2005). Much of the discussion is the area has taken a comparative form. For example, when a cultural lens is applied to the currently in-vogue metaphor of 'learning community', differences in driving values, and so subsequent actions, emerge. The richness here lies in the influence of culture on how leadership is understood, constructed and enacted.

Begley (2000) and Walker Hallinger & Qian (2007) point out that current western notions of democratic learning communities constructed within culturally-restricted understandings may be at best puzzling for school leaders in vertically aligned culture systems, where democracy may hold very different meanings (Jansen, 2006; Leung & Chan, 2001; Hallinger & Kantamara, 2002). Roles in and modes of participation in community-building differ in a number of ways; two of the more obvious are in terms of power-distance and collectivism.

More distinct "power gaps" tend to that exist among people in many Asian and Middle Eastern cultures than in Anglo-American societies. These are reflected in the daily cultural practices of schools. For example, vertically aligned cultural systems exert significant influence upon social relations in the workplace. Persons of lower status (i.e., age, position, seniority) naturally defer to those of higher status, accepting differences in power as a normal feature of social relations. Educational leaders and followers consequently tend to be more conscious of status and hierarchy than colleagues in western contexts, even as they are more conscious of the need to foster community. Leaders are granted respect by followers based on age, formal position and seniority. There is tacit acquiescence among followers as long as the leader's behaviors remain aligned with these cultural norms. This normative reciprocity preserves relationships and promotes surface harmony among the members of social groups (Hallinger, Walker & Bajunid, 2005)

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East Asian, Middle Eastern and Latin American societies, be it in different ways, are recognized for their collectivist orientation. Although the meaning of collectivism is widely debated, a high collectivist orientation suggests that people form personal perspectives first and foremost in terms of their significant group associations (Hofstede, 1994). In terms of behavior in schools, this implies that individual teachers and mid-level leaders, as well as the principal, subjugate their needs, ambitions and, if necessary, opinions for the greater good of the school.

A combination of high power distance and collectivism creates a rigorous interplay, form example, when applied to conceptions such as distributed leadership and empowerment – which form key tenets of 'learning communities' in much of the western literature. While, high power distance reinforces the formal authority accorded principals, collectivist tendencies shape the enactment of that power (Walker & Dimmock, 2005). It is the consensus-building in which leaders engage within the values and norms of their school communities that creates the legitimacy needed to act. Within a school, this may mean that teachers interact with their leaders without engaging in open disagreement. This does not mean that discontent does not agitate below the surface, but to emerge it must follow often informally ascribed tracks before it is addressed. Leadership, therefore, may be sometimes more concerned with maintaining illusory rather than actual harmony. When viewed through western leadership lenses, it can appear as if the desire for smooth relationships interferes with task achievement (Hallinger, Walker & Bajunid, 2005).

In short, the "community" metaphor 'in play' in East Asian and Middle Eastern societies looks very different from that in North America and Europe. Of course it will also vary within all these societies, but the generalities of difference remain apparent. I return to this important later.

The status-quo: Although research and understanding of the influence of culture on school leadership are yet to match either the scope or sophistication of international business studies such as those by Hofstede (2005) or the *Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness* (GLOBE) *Study* (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004) the trend is certainly in motion.

As noted, over the last ten to fifteen years a growing number of scholars have set out to more explicitly understand notions of school leadership across different societal and/or cultural contexts. Their work covers a range of areas. Some of the more notable of these are successful principals (Jacobson, Day & Leithwood, 2005; Leithwood, 2005), beginning principals (Walker, 2006), leadership in developing societies (Oplatka, 2004); leadership

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and values (Begley & Wong, 2001), leadership and ethics (Begley, 2007), leadership and reform (Townsend and Cheng, 2000) and leadership development (Hallinger, 2003 & 2004; Huber, 2004) to name but some.

Although taking somewhat different tacks, work across such areas are connected in that they seek to capture intricacies of what leadership looks like across different cultures, how it is enacted, and why it plays out in particular ways. The task as set by Stambech (2003) is:

> *….not one of identifying what is universal or converging, nor to label and minutely specify what is unique about each situation, but to address how locally interpreted narratives give force to universal categories and how universal categories give force to local narratives. (p. 157)*

This paper now focuses on the influence of culture specifically on school leader development. The following section justifies and then illustrates the selection of this focus.

The influence of culture on leader development

Further assumptions and rationale: In section one I suggested three broad assumptions underpinning the quest to better understand of the influence of culture on school leadership. In brief, these were that leadership does make a difference in schools, that multiple contexts influence how school leaders lead and that since leadership is mainly concerned with the enactment of values, it is reasonable to assume that culture is an important influence on how leadership is conceptualized and exercised. Two additional assumptions specifically target leader development.

The fourth assumption is that the study of leader development cannot be separated from the study of leaders themselves, or from what constitutes effective leadership in different societies. An example of this can be inferred from the GLOBE Study (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman and Gupta, 2004). The study aimed to develop an empirically based theory to describe, understand and predict the influence of cultural variables on leadership and organizational processes. It attempted to show that both individuals *and* groups of individuals in certain societies possess an implicit leadership theory. In other words, it 'wanted to show that societal and organizational culture influences the kind of leadership found to be acceptable and effective by people within that culture' (Grovewell, 2005, p. 4).

Whereas it is not possible to discuss the outcomes of this study in any detail, it identified ways in which people worldwide distinguish between leaders who are effective and ineffective. Perhaps more importantly, drew some conclusions about extent to which differences in leader styles and effectiveness across societal clusters could be explained in

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terms of the values that prevailed in those clusters. Such findings have been used to inform both the content and form of leader development programs across different sectors and societies. The knowledge identified about leaders fed naturally and usefully into leader learning – when allowed to

The fifth assumption is that leader development actually makes a difference, be it in different ways, to what leaders do in schools. Beyond largely anecdotal evidence this can be difficult to verify (Jones, 2006); however, there appears now some general agreement that certain approaches to leader development have at least the potential to be an important factor in improving leader practice. For example, recent wide-ranging reviews by Huber (2004), Hallinger (2003) Hallinger and Snidvongs (2005), Earley and Weindling (2004), Wales and Welle-Strand (2005), Walker, Chen and Qian (2009) have identified a number of elements which are increasingly prominent in leader development programs.

These include program linkage to leadership reality and school life, opportunities for reflection, involvement of experienced practitioners as mentors and or coaches, formal and informal grouping and networking and intentional design. These developments provide some understanding of useful generic development approaches. But, in terms of how they travel, or the shape they may take in different societies, serious questions remain (Hoppe, 2004):

- Are the models and practices of leader development being used by context-specific organizations and development programs applicable across cultural contexts?
- What adjustments need to be made in methods, practices, assessment and philosophies so that they will work in or across cultures?
- What can be done to successfully transfer western (or other) leadership development models and practice?
- And, indeed, should western (or other) leader development models and practices be transferred? And if so, how? (p. 331)

Lumby et al. (2009) add further credence to the argument for deeper understanding of the influence of culture on leader development. They provide four important, interrelated reasons.

- If programs are to make a difference to what leaders do in specific contexts and cultures, the design, and indeed content, must hold legitimacy and currency within that context. For example, there is little point of transmitting notions of democratic learning communities constructed within culturally-restricted understandings to

leaders in vertically aligned culture systems where democracy may hold very different meanings (Begley, 2000).

- If school leaders themselves are to grow, regardless of where they operate, they need to be aware of how their cultural values underpin the ways they see the world, interact with others, view learning and construct community. In other words, they need to develop an awareness of how their own cultural values filter and in some cases restrict their views and actions.
- In an increasingly intercultural world, leaders often operate as cultural outsiders – separated by values, understandings and aspirations from their students, communities and even their teachers. This applies as much within as it does between national, societal or geographic boarders. Although this section does not delve into leader development in intercultural schools, it may well hold messages for leaders in such circumstances (Walker & Chen, 2008).
- Fourth, awareness of different cultures and cultural influence will support agency in responding to the simultaneously homogenizing and diversifying pressures of globalization and help to balance the often one-sided argument that globalization will inevitably lead to the values convergence and so dissolution of difference. As Dorfman, Hanges, Broadbeck (2004) state:

  > *While we acknowledge that global communication, technical innovation and industrialization can create a milieu for cultural change, a convergence among cultural values is by no means assured. In fact, cultural differences among societies may be exacerbated as they adapt to modernization while simultaneously striving to preserve their cultural heritage.* (p. 709)

Understanding and interpreting the influence of culture on leader development, or anything else, however, is a difficult task, mainly because of cultural boundedness; it is so difficult to 'find' or 'see' where others are coming from. Hoppe (2004) provides an example of this, he explains that developing cultural self-awareness can be difficult for some Americans because: ', since they often interpret cultural factors as characteristics of individual personality' (p. 334).

Leader Development Programs: Leader Development Programs (LDPs) can be interpreted as sites of 'ritual process' wherein the larger cultural, historical and national conflicts that face leaders are confronted and redressed as they manifest themselves in the particular organizations and individual lives of program participants (Jones, 2006, p. 483)

In very simple terms, LDPs normally include both *content* and *process* components. Some are more heavily loaded one way than the other. For example content comprising some programs in East Asia rest mainly on theory, knowledge and skills built on quite foreign understandings and values. They are often imparted using variations of a transmission model. That is, where experts 'pass down' theory and knowledge through assorted mediums to others – moderated to varying degrees by localized familiarity.

'Import' can take any number of forms - two of these serve as examples. The first can be referred to as *theory-wrapped knowledge*; normally flown in as part of university-based programs, overseas experts, local scholars and trainers returning from overseas study, textbooks, journals, simulations, case-studies, websites and so on. The second takes the form of values-driven, neatly *pre-packaged programs* built around lists of preset competencies.

Increasingly fashionable process components of LDPs are also often developed in foreign settings but, at least at first glance, appear more suited to working with indigenous values and knowledge. Processes models are normally built around particular notions of community – or more specifically communities of (leader) learners. Such models as currently in vogue in the United Kingdom, parts of the United States and Australia, Singapore and Hong Kong incorporate elements such as workplace learning, mentoring and coaching, internship, action learning. The worth of these elements depend largely on relational processes such as discussion, debate, and feedback self-analysis and open contextual analysis, all built on some type of structural scaffolding.

Content-based elements: While acknowledging the positive aspects of cross-fertilization, the weaknesses of directly importing decontexualized content are fairly widely acknowledged (Walker, 2006). The basic argument is that content is too often transmitted with insufficient sensitivity to or understanding of how leadership is constructed or how schools operate in different cultural contexts - indigenization is largely left to serendipity. As Jones (2006) notes when discussing content used by the Center for Creative Leadership in cross-national LDPs:

> *Simulations are, in effect, prefigured with 'rational' decisions made by 'rationale' actors with whom participants must interact. Such normative assumptions are not culturally neutral; rather, they are distinctly western in their assumptions about human behavior and the psychological backdrop of decision making (p. 485)*

This criticism of course holds equally well within as between societies, particularly when addressing leadership within indigenous or intercultural communities.

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Two brief examples which build around some of the earlier discussion serve to illustrate this point. The first relates to the current popularity in the some societies with the concept of distributed leadership. At least as often conceptualized, this makes little sense to leaders in high power distance societies where hierarchical inequities are accepted, and leadership is closely tied to position and ordered responsibilities. This is true throughout the Middle East, Southeast and East Asia, and also in many African societies (Jansen, 2006).

The second example is that of democratic school communities. Democratizing reforms call for teachers to openly assert their views, even if they dissent with community values. Such notions may be flawed in cultures where the open expression of diverse views is believed to unnecessarily complicate decision situations and challenge smooth relationships. This does not mean that people do not hold or communicate diverse views; rather it is a matter of *how, when, why*, they do it. It is here that cultural nuance emerges and challenges the relevance of theory and associated knowledge included in many LDPs.

Perhaps one of the most worrying trends in terms of content-culture misfit is apparent in LDPs assembled around generalized lists of competencies - or what is sometimes called indicators of 'best practice'. Given the rise of the standards movement it is unsurprising that some educators are even trying to develop of list of international school leadership 'best practice'. Defining best practice implies an attempt to regulate or 'bottle a prescriptive formula' (Walker & Stott, 2000) which may disregard that social expressions, and so effective leadership and leader development, differ across cultures in respect to power, communication, change and action. Criticism of competency lists are common within relatively homogenous systems (Glatter & Kydd, 2003; Loudon & Wildy, 1999; Walker & Quong, 2005), but when used to underpin LDPs in very different societal cultures, even more serious questions about their legitimacy surface.

Leader values and behaviors broken down into competency indicators and considered effective in places like East Asia and the Middle East which emphasize respect for authority and position, tradition and religion or indirectness in communication are less likely to be part of western LDPs, and visa-versa. For example, a study of leaders across cultures asked participants to list the top five functions of leadership. In the US sample, one of the top five was 'get results – manage strategy to action'. However, this was not rated in the top five choices by leaders in France, Germany, Japan, Korea and Spain (Hoppe, 2004, p. 338).

In sum, imported content components, regardless of their directional flow, which focus predominantly on transferring knowledge, risk separating leadership performance from the cultures within which it is constructed. Knowledge and skills, according to Brooks (2005)

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touch only the most superficial components of human capital and ignore other more complex forms, such as *cultural*, *social*, *moral*, *cognitive* and *aspirational capital*, which are manifested somewhat differently in different cultures contexts. When programs are, for example, based on competency approaches that primarily reflect Anglo-American values and models of human behavior, important issues of cultural bias and generalizabilty come to the fore. This suggests that we look more closely at the learning processes involved in leader development. It may be that these transfer more easily and effectively than knowledge or competencies, but it is important to note that cultural considerations remain.

Community-based elements. An increasingly common approach to leader development is the building of communities of practice. This acknowledges the power of learning together and places informal learning in its social setting of work relationships and group dynamics. Communities of practice can be based within an organization or constructed outside units based on shared need. They often involve the purposeful building of cohorts or groups specifically to share learning. Development programs fitting this mold assume leader learning is most effective when it explicitly taps leaders' tacit knowledge, becomes integral to their job, is based firmly within the purpose and context of the school (and, more specifically, student learning), involves multiple opportunities for social interaction, and encourages group and individual reflection. All of which aim to embed a sense of community among leader learners where mutual support, shared wisdom and meaningful dialogue drive learning.

If collections of leaders are to transform into learning communities a number of conditions are necessary; these include open self and group analysis (for example, through 360^0 feedback), trust, meaningful feedback, challenge, partnership, debate and openness (for example, see Lambert, 2005, Sackney &Walker, 2006). 360^0 feedback involves leaders in collecting feedback on their performance from different groups relevant to their work as a means of providing them a broader perspective on their effectiveness. For principals, for example, this may involve gathering feedback from students, teachers, inspectors or parents.

In general, community-based elements may be more readily transferable across cultures in that they are designed around existing professional knowledge (although this does not exclude the infusion of more formal knowledge) and driven by relational processes. However, it is here that the nuances of cultural influence become important to program efficacy - once again - the devil is in the detail. Attention to cultural nuance is perhaps even

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more important when learning becomes more dependent on social and professional relationships. This does not imply that they are out of place in particular cultures – people in all cultures share wisdom in some way - but that implementation processes, relational norms and formalized designs are sensitively considered. This holds whether they are being passed from east to west, north to south or any other direction. A number of interrelated examples built around some of the relation dynamics or processes of leader learning communities help illustrate the point, these are support, feedback and challenge.

Support: components in LDPs are those which aim partly to maintain self-esteem and reduce professional isolation by letting leaders know that their strengths are important and valued. They aim to engage leaders in new experiences and change processes by providing a comfortable, trusting environment. Support is usually expressed through interpersonal encouragement or resources and norms that value personal growth. Sounds good, but even here culture can complicate things.

Using GLOBE terminology, a comparison between Anglo and Confucian contexts exemplifies the possible influence of culture on building support into LDPs. Hoppe (2004) claims US leaders can have difficulty seeking support because of the deep tradition of individualism and independence; and cultural admiration for the self-made women or man, where the high achiever succeeds through individual talent, ability and effort. As such, an over-dependence on another can actually be seen as a sign of weakness. Success then is seen as something to be achieved in competition with others.

In contrast, Europeans construct leadership in, 'a more social-cultural (vs. individual-psychological) assessment of accomplishment and responsibility (which) prevails as a cultural value' (Jones, 2006, p. 486). Hence, accepting support through LDPs may be a somewhat smoother process. In some ways, programs looking to establish supportive relationships between leaders for learning can cause fewer problems in more collective societies, like Indonesia, where group needs take precedence.

However, closer examination exposes differently shaped problems and ways of enactment. First, support from outside a relationally defined in-group can be discouraged as leaders appear more comfortable receiving support from people they are close to; and reluctant because of 'face' issues to open-up to people outside their in-group. Second, in cultures where collectivism is combined with high power-distance, it can be difficult to give or receive support. Within some cultures, accepted power inequity is accompanied by care and support but, in return, loyalty and subordination are expected. In other words, sources of

personal support are limited by status and position. As a result, available supportive learning relationships can be somewhat proscribed (Hoppe, 2004).

Given relational intricacies across cultures, sensitivity is needed when selecting individuals to be paired or grouped for mentoring or coaching. For example, depending on the dominant values, it can be hazardous to match people of different ethnic or national backgrounds, across genders or across levels of schooling; all may make people feel uncomfortable. In Hong Kong mentoring and coaching for local Chinese principals appears best done in small groups rather than one-on-one –called Learning Squares (Walker & Quong, 2006). Grouping must also take careful account of hierarchy and seniority, and cannot cross school-level bounds such as elementary and high schools.

Feedback: Communities of practice require *feedback* of one form or another. In it's various forms, feedback basically aims to provide leaders with knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures, and insights into their blind-spots .It can come from different groups, such as leader peers grouped for specific long or short term programs, ongoing leadership learning clusters or from within the school community where the leader works, perhaps through a development-oriented 360° feedback processes. It can take verbal, written or other visual forms.

Leslie, Gryskiewicz and Dalton (1998) identified assumptive differences between cultures about 360° feedback, and the interpretation of results. They found that feedback data in the US was assumed to be 'owned' by the individual, whereas in more collectivist China, even if collected for developmental purposes, it is seen as the property of the group. There were also differences in ratings according to whether anonymity was guaranteed. In such circumstances, peers in France tended to rate their colleagues down in order to gain an advantage, the Chinese tended to inflate the ratings to please their superiors, and individual leaders in the US boosted ratings out of career concerns (Hoppe, 2004).

In terms of self ratings, US leaders tended to rate themselves higher than their supervisors or peers whereas in Taiwan, they were more likely to rate themselves lower. According to Hoope (2004) this, '…is due in part to the cultures' different emphasis on competition versus collaboration' (p. 352). He also claims that Chinese leaders avoid extreme ratings because of the cultural importance of maintaining harmonious relations and preserving status. If such differences hold, LDPs need to account not only for the methods and processes of the mechanisms included, but, and perhaps even more importantly, relational understandings and values.

A second illustration relates to how feedback is interpreted by leaders holding different cultural values. Different interpretations of direct, face-to-face feedback (or lack thereof) are illustrative because of their growing place within program based on mentoring and/or coaching, both of which hold cultural messages. Dorfman, Howell, Hibino, Lee, Tate and Bautista (1997) compared leaders in the US, Japan, Mexico, South Korea and Taiwan across a number of areas. Out of this sample, only US leaders said that they responded positively to negative feedback.

On the other hand, positive feedback had a positive impact in all five countries. In other words, feedback that is direct, honest, specific and measurable tends to be welcome in US workplaces – whether it points out strengths or shortcomings, but this is not necessarily so elsewhere. This finding was confirmed by Javidan (2004) who found that leaders in achievement cultures (where status is based on accomplishments) welcome and value feedback as an indication of how they are doing, whereas those in ascribing cultures (where status is based upon who the person is) avoid direct feedback because they see it as commenting on the person, rather than what they do in their jobs.

The acceptance of feedback also relates to the form and path of feedback. For example, in Chinese societies like Hong Kong, negative feedback between those of unequal status (whether up or down the hierarchy), especially but not exclusively within the same organization, tends to be unacceptable if given directly, but more accepted if provided through intermediaries and if delivered in a somewhat non-personalized, polite format (Wearley, 2006). Feedback within like-status groups is acceptable, but still only if done gently and in a 'round-about' way.

Communities of practice involve moving from solely content-driven, university or training provider classrooms to the workplace, and hence the 'real world' of leaders. This takes various paths, but increasingly common forms include action and experiential learning – or learning-by-doing. Experiential learning is a process where individuals learn through their experience at work. Action Learning involves working on an action centered project in the school. Within themselves, these are certainly worthwhile structures for leadership learning, but cultural nuances endure.

Challenge: Hoppe (2004) suggests that a common thread across learning-by-doing learning is that of challenge. In other words, assignments, such as action learning projects, whether internally or externally prescribed, are designed to challenge the leaders in order to help them learn. In very basic terms, challenge uses mechanisms designed to extend people beyond their existing levels of thought, skills and expertise through exposing them to new,

difficult or ill-defined situations. It aims to induce cognitive conflict through exposing a gap between what people know and what else is possible. On the surface, challenge is powerful learning strategy, but in terms of either work-based or non work-based leadership development programs how it is done and what it involves are important. Some questions we might ask include (Hoppe, 2004):

- How do members of different cultures respond to uncertainties and ambiguities which accompany challenge?
- What does challenge look like in collectivist cultures where the group rather than the individual is the focus?
- How will leader development react to this? (p. 353)

Some cultures value challenge and subsequent feedback and reflection as a learning strategy. For example, cross-cultural literature suggests that mainstream US culture is open to experiences of change, personal growth, and lifelong mobility. As noted above, 'hero leaders' are those who have failed many times before succeeding. In such cultures, where people are more comfortable with change, they tend to value learning by doing, which implies the learners cannot know what will happen next. Leaders in the US, Great Britain and Sweden seem to follow cultural norms which suits an active approach to learning.

In contrast, leaders in France, Germany and Turkey seem more concerned with stability, continuity and certainty. In other words, they may be less comfortable in novel or potentially confliction situations that push them too far beyond their comfort zone. Leaders in these societies seem to find comfort in rules, structure, standard procedures, functional expertise, intellectual models and predictability (Hoppe, 2004).

Cultural dynamics around 'challenge' are also relevant in collectivist cultures, such as Japan, where group loyalty is very important. In these cultures the learning needs and aspirations of the individual are subordinated to those of the group. As such, challenging activities as part of LDPs may need to be more staggered and designed to avoid failure, embarrassment and discomfort. An emphasis on loyalty and group belonging may result in different approaches to development in that the group instead of the individual are the target. The individual then becomes the agent of the group and their performance is embedded within collective effort. This may well call for different approaches in LDPs.

Culturally aware leader development - five propositions

From the above discussion I have extracted five propositions related to building culturally aware school leader development opportunities. These may be informative to those interested in school leader development and its potential for improving schools regardless of their place within, across or out side their cultures of origin. These are designed to stimulate discussion and may be relevant for cultural fit within as much as across societies.

1. The transportation of leader development approaches across cultures needs to move beyond surface concepts and their too-neatly attached content and focus more on the processes which place these in context and, thereby, respect deeply embedded cultural norms. For example, emerging understandings that leader development is most successfully instituted through diverse, work related and practitioner supported developmental experiences is likely to travel well across boundaries – but only as long as they are done in context and are sensitive to cultural norms. While it is true that generalizabilty may be burred by globalization, technology and industrialization as the global economy takes root, and that similar leader qualities across cultures and organizations may well emerge - the way in which knowledge and processes are enacted and interpreted will continue to differ according to cultural values and norms, even as they hybridize.
2. In any leader development activity, cross-fertilization across sites, countries cultures and schools is desirable, but what is happening now in many parts of the world is not cross-fertilization, rather, it is largely a one-way flow that sometimes holds insufficient respect for local traditions. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is often mirrored within multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies themselves and is played out in leader development activities which gloss over the value orientations of cultural groups. For leader development programs this suggests the importance of an emphasis on values, particularly in terms of their formulation and intentionality, regardless of their cultural base. The unthinking import of knowledge or ideas applies equally regardless of the direction it flows.
3. When programs travel across cultural boundaries their associated beliefs and knowledge must not be, or be seen to be, a hegemonic device or a desire to impose 'one best way'. In terms of leader development, the purpose of sharing ideas and thoughts between societies is to increase understanding and tolerance; and to question existing conceptions in order to make schools better places for students. In short they should provoke our curiosity and not be about domination. Whereas it is fine to challenge cultural norms and ways of working - this is good for leader

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learning – but it is very different from culturally-restricted or biased approaches which too often slip across boarders.

4. As highlighted in the assumptive base outlined earlier, we cannot study leader development without studying leaders – the two agendas must be amalgamated. This has at least two faces. First, we can't work out how to support leaders' learning across cultures unless we know more about the cultures themselves and how these influence what leaders do. Second, amalgamating understanding of leadership and leader learning may well be a fruitful avenue for improving our programs even if cultural variation is minimal. The exercise of working out how to cater for difference, whether it is obvious or subtle, can only help us produce more connected, meaningful learning opportunities for leaders.
5. Given that leaders learn in different ways both within and between cultures, and that learning should be a continuous, lifelong affair, it is important that multiple, varied opportunities for learning are available. This calls not just for differentiated content but for multiple delivery modes (for example, Story Based Learning) which allow for differing learning purposes and styles. What is involved here should remain in a fluid state so that programs not only cover the necessary 'basics', but also the variable situations where culturally-aware learning takes place. Such models may usefully be based around 'curiosity' and promote flexibility within structure in response to dominant cultural values.

The perils of seeking cultural influence

Leadership makes a difference, culture matters and culture influences how leaders think and what they do. If we accept this, it is axiomatic that culture will influence leader development. However, a final caveat, when discussing anything to do with studying culture extreme care must be taken – understanding culture is much easier said than done. Walker (2003) identified a number of issues which must be considered when moving to study the influence of culture schools and school leadership. These are outlined very simply below but deserve further consideration.

Definition: The concept of culture itself is nebulous (Brislin, 1993) – it has generated multiple definitions and ambiguities. There appears to be only general agreement in the literature on a definition of culture. Culture is difficult to handle both politically and emotionally. As (Harrison, 2000) states "It (culture) is also difficult to deal with

intellectually because there are problems of definition and measurement and because cause and effect relationships between culture and other variables like policies, institutions….run in both directions" (p. xxxii).

Divergence or Convergence: Taken to the level of the individual school, the debate over how culture should be defined raises the question of whether culture on its own is sufficient to explain differences between leaders, teachers and schools in different societies? Stated another way, the question is whether organizations, such as schools, are culture bound or culture free. Alone, culture does not have the explanatory power to account for all of the differences between schools in different societies or regions. Economic, political, geographic religious and demographic factors, for example, may play a key role. Any investigation of leadership in different cultures is at least partly underpinned by the seemingly perpetual question of whether, and the extent to which, societal culture influences what leaders do (Emihovich, 2006).

Specificity of Definition: At a less theoretical and macro level the methodological conundrum which emerges from defining culture exposes a tension between taking a fragmented or a monolithic view of culture. The monolithic view assumes culture to be ubiquitous, thereby elevating a particular conception of culture and creating a risk of over-generalization, making comparisons precarious. As Harrison (2000, p. xv) warns, "If culture includes everything, it explains nothing". A fragmented and localized interpretation of culture, on the other hand, through recognizing multiple sub-cultures and failing to draw any form of generalization, may equally fail to provide valid comparison.

Cultural Baselines: A related difficulty when using culture as a basis for increasing understanding of education leadership is to assume that culture has to be interpreted using a baseline culture for comparison. However, the problem then becomes deciding whose culture provides that baseline.

Stereotyping Cultures: Cross-cultural research in educational administration may be skewed by a tendency to assume that cultures are homogeneous within national boundaries, or even within larger groups of countries such as 'Asia' or 'Europe'. A common example of this inaccuracy is the grouping of Asian countries into an undifferentiated 'Confucian' mass. As Rizvi (1997) notes: "More collectivism modes of social organization are portrayed as Asian compared to the liberal individualism that is believed to be so dominant in the West" (p. 21).

Individuals and Culture: A further issue confounding the search for the influence of culture is the relationship between individual personality and culture. Arguments downplaying the

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role of culture claim that individuals will behave in line with their own beliefs or mental models regardless of cultural background. In terms of organizations such as schools, this may be a circular argument. As Lindsay (2000, p. 286) explains: "Mental models apply to individuals and groups of individuals – and are identifiable and changeable. Culture reflects the aggregation of individual mental models and in turn influences the types of mental models that individuals have. The two are linked in a perpetually evolving system."

Cultural Hybridity: Issues of cultural definition and shape are further complicated by the fact that firstly, cultures are constantly shifting and, secondly, that cultural values seem to produce different effects at different times. Cultures are not static, moribund entities; rather, they are dynamic and invariably changing (Trice & Beyer, 1993). As Rizvi (1997) notes, with increasing globalization and population mobility, cultures can best be described as hybrids, constantly shifting, growing and developing as they encounter different ideas, new knowledge and changing circumstances.

The timing of 'culture': In a related vein, researching culture is difficult because at different times the same values seem to produce different effects. Pye (2000) shows this clearly using the example of 'Asian' values; values which have been used over the last decade to explain both the rapid economic rise of many Southeast Asian economies and, conversely, the fragility and vulnerability of these very same economies.

Methodology: The conceptual issues discussed above all have implications for the type of methodology that may guide cross cultural exploration in the field – but that's another paper.

Conclusion

On the back of numerous scholarly and more pragmatic interests, research into educational leadership in diverse cultures is on the move, but still has a long way to go (Heck, 1996). Despite increased output, there endures a shortage of studies, especially written in English, on principalship and educational leadership in non-western cultures. This is not surprising given the difficulties of understanding and interpreting, for example, the influence of culture on leadership, the critical lack of even the most basic resources for schools in many societies and the political and religious divisions which continue to divide them.

Uncovering cultural nuance is a difficult task, mainly because much of what shapes and reflects how leaders think and what they do is difficult to 'find' or 'see'. This 'blindness' is because people are often not only unaware of the influence of culture on other groups, but

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also of their own culture on themselves. Hoppe (2004) explains that developing cross-cultural self-awareness is complex because culture, in essence, is internalized patterns of thinking and behaving that are believed to be "natural" - or merely "the way things are". This is compounded by the dynamic state of culture and development internationally, nationally and locally.

This observation highlights the permeable nature of the cultural and other boundaries that exist between schools and their surrounding societies. This is the nexus at which school leaders worldwide are located today. Cultural values and other contextual conditions differ between and within societies, and these differences carry over into education. To push research onwards, different values must be respected, even if not fully understood. This does is not to suggest that every culture's values are equally desirable simply because they are the culture's values. For example, in too many locations cultural, economic and social stratification continues to legitimate institutionally unacceptable inequities in access to education among the poor, minorities and females. Identification and elimination of these inequities, however, is near impossible unless we increase understanding of why they exist across diverse contexts. In terms of educational leadership, this means working across as well as within cultures in order to better understand how, why and indeed, whether, leaders make a difference – and how providers can aid their development.

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