

What Matters Most in the Design of Universal Professional Learning for School Leaders: An
International Perspective

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Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the organizations and school leaders who participated in this inquiry. Their collective passion for improving school leadership has been inspiring!

Introduction

Our international, collaborative inquiry set out to explore and advance our understanding of how to develop the practices of school leaders in different cultures. In particular, we explore “what matters most” in designing professional learning for school leaders and advancing a set of universal design principles.

In advancing our understanding, we investigated the impact of the International School Leadership Certificate Program (ISLCP), one program that purports to be universal and is delivered in a wide array of jurisdictions around the world. For our purposes, we selected three of these jurisdictions to explore these key questions: What theories, concepts, and research presented in the program resulted in changing the leadership practices of the participants? What is required in the contextualization of a professional learning program that is designed to be universal? What universal design principles emerge?

The three case studies, including Scandinavia, the Caribbean, and Australia provide rich stories of how the ISLCP impacted practice. In the end, the evidence supports the proposition that a professional learning certificate program for school leaders, designed according to key universal principles, is a powerful approach to enhance performance, regardless of local culture and context.

The International School Leadership Certificate Program

International School Leadership Ltd. delivers professional learning for school leaders around the world, with online, hybrid, and onsite delivery. The core program consists of six modules, equating to 60 hours of instruction (internationalschoolleadership.com).

The theories, concepts, and research presented in the program are intentionally selected to reflect an international perspective, although the Ontario, Canada experience is well represented (internationalschoolleadership.com). These resources constantly change as new ideas emerge and consultation across the globe occurs. Some changes in the program take place to align with district initiatives and related documents; however, the vast majority of the program remains the same from one region to another.

The program is designed for school leaders in various roles, ranging from principal to lead teacher, as well as system and governance roles. The program has been delivered to role-specific groups and to groups representing all of the aforementioned roles (internationalschoolleadership.com).

The program is recognized for credit within master's degrees offered by four universities in Hong Kong, Australia, and Canada. Further, the content of the ISL program is embedded in a master's degree offered by one of these universities and represents 50% of the coursework.

What We Know Today

First, we know that the growing multidimensional demands on today's school leaders require a wider range of skills than those obtained in the course of a teaching degree or through generic professional development delivered to teachers throughout their teaching career. Today, school leaders are expected to exercise their own discretion in school, staff, and curriculum management, and bear the burden of many expectations relating to operational and academic accountability, instructional leadership, teacher quality, and school and student achievement; the list continues to grow. However, the content of many professional development programs has not evolved to reflect these expectations (Asuga, Eacott, & Scevak, 2015; Clarke & Styles, 2011; Devin, 2016). In fact, the research paints an unflattering picture and demonstrates a need to re-focus programs to address globally-minded school leadership development, to support the need for innovation, to respond to the rapid changes in societal culture and to answer the need for a framework for best practice (Easley & Tulowitzki, 2013).

Next, we know that effective school leadership influences student learning and school improvement, second only to classroom instruction (Devin, 2016; Eacott, 2013; Ng, 2016). How school leaders are prepared for their roles is important (Asuga et al., 2015; Eacott, 2013; McCarthy, 2015; Ng, 2016). We also know that even though the role of school leader continues to evolve and varies from one jurisdiction to another, common core competencies appear in leadership frameworks. For example, the use of data in school improvement efforts appeared as a set of practices in leadership frameworks. Other core competencies included setting direction (vision), building relationships, promoting collaboration, allocating resources, and building community connections ("Five core capacities" 2012).

And finally, research has indicated that graduates of training programs that run in conjunction with universities are often more successful than programs facilitated by training providers alone. Using an approach that promoted partnerships between educational districts and universities and a merger of theory and practice positively impacted on graduates' acquisition of knowledge and engagement in effective leadership practices (Devin, 2016; Ng, 2016). These programs had a common set of characteristics (Devin, 2016; McCarthy, 2015; Ng, 2016; Piggot-Irvine & Youngs, 2011; Hallinger et al., 2018):

- standards-based knowledge;
- coherent curriculum and philosophy emphasizing leadership of instruction and school improvement;
- supportive student principal cohorts for principals;
- rigorous candidate selection, including self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, autonomy, instructional skills and knowledge; and
- knowledgeable faculty.

In addition, the aforementioned studies identified core program elements, such as an international curriculum with specific elements linked to local context (Asuga et al., 2015) and the facility to undertake personal reflection to develop knowledge in and of principal practice (Easley & Tulowitzki, 2013; Piggot-Irvine & Youngs, 2011). Specifically, diverse curriculum embraced a wide range of expectations and accountabilities, including:

- learning for personal transformation;
- student outcomes focus;
- evaluation and adaptation of initiatives in response to sector climate/needs;
- soft and hard skills;

- international and cross-cultural exposure;
- team work, including horizontal and vertical collaboration and distributed leadership;
- linking leadership development with organizational goals;
- use of multiple learning methods (Piggot-Irvine & Youngs, 2011); and
- Use of a capstone project rather than dissertation or thesis (Hallinger et al., 2018; McCarthy, 2015).

Overall, research has provided a picture of the current state of professional learning programs for school leaders and a common understanding from which to explore the key questions of this study.

How it Worked: The Methodology

In investigating what matters most in the design of universal professional learning for school leaders, the case study approach was used to provide insight into school leaders' perceptions of the ISL program across three international locations. A case study can be described as an in-depth and comprehensive study of a specific individual, group of individuals, or event. Case studies are used to explore the interactions between a phenomenon and the context in which it occurs (Pacho, 2015; Yin, 2014).

A total of 25 school leaders were involved in this study from three regions across the world including Scandinavia, the Caribbean, and Australia. The school leaders were purposefully selected as they had just participated in the ISL program and were interviewed to determine their perceptions of the ISL program and provide insight into the effectiveness of international professional learning for school leaders. The research was qualitative as it had a focus on the meaning of an experience to the participants in a natural setting and provided a descriptive, holistic account of this experience or phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007b; Pacho, 2015).

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Each interview was approximately one hour in length and digitally recorded by the interviewer. All of the interviews in the Caribbean and Australia were conducted in person; several of the Scandinavian interviews were conducted online using a web conferencing service, while the majority took place in person. The questions (Appendix A) were designed to probe school leaders' interaction and understanding of all of the program modules.

Case Studies

School leaders from the jurisdictions of Scandinavia, Caribbean and Australia were interviewed for this study. In selecting the jurisdictions for the case studies, efforts were made to represent northern and southern hemispheres, as well as large and small jurisdictions. Further, although the language of instruction is English, we wanted to include a jurisdiction where English was a second language.

The Scandinavian case study involved 5 school leaders including recently appointed principals and vice-principals, a recently appointed system leader, and several seasoned principals. In the case of the Caribbean study, 7 principals and deputies were involved in the study. And, finally, the Australian case study involved very seasoned principals, deputies, and recently appointed deputies.

Data Analysis Abridged

Each transcript was read and subjected to an initial coding process undertaken by one member of the research team. All transcripts were reread and coded according to a number of common key leadership themes. After this initial analysis, all members of the research team reviewed and refined the qualitative analysis and conducted a secondary check of the initial coding. From this secondary coding process key leadership themes were identified for each

international case, and these are detailed below. This process also identified key leadership themes across each of the three cases that informed what matters most in terms of the professional learning of school leaders and, the design and delivery principles that should inform the delivery of international universal school leadership programs.

What Was Found

In Scandinavia

For the Scandinavian participants, five key leadership themes were identified by school leaders as making a difference in their practice: use of data, importance of being a lead learner, relationship building, walkthroughs, and assessment as learning.

What Did They Say About Using Data?

All Scandinavian participants reported on the revelation that data offers the potential to support a wide range of leadership practices intended to improve understanding, collective action, and overall learning. The revelation, however, was accompanied by a clearer understanding that collecting data “is a starting point for change” (Participant) and that using data effectively requires time, commitment, “a rich variety of information” (Participant), and a willingness to question past assumptions and beliefs. One principal summarized the change in practice this way.

And so, we have used the data quite a lot... getting to know a school everyone thinks they know by heart and knows very well in a new way, because we have started to look at data over a larger span of time, or a certain span of time, and we have started to see that there are certain developments that it's important for us to work with that [we] haven't identified before. (Participant)

In fact, this more in-depth understanding of data enabled leaders to articulate to their communities that things are not always what they seem: “here’s some data that can show you this is not only a school problem, this is also maybe a community problem for this part of the municipality that we have to work together on” (Participant). For example, with effective data use, this principal was able to quell a parent and community concern about the school’s marking system.

According to our research, successful use of data, such as this example, builds the leader’s confidence and enthusiasm for using data. Equally important, however, is the leader’s impact on collective inquiry practices within their school.

We got into data and what it’s really about with all the perspectives and all the things you observe and all the conversations you have. All the things that you know, making the whole picture.... They are inspired to continue to understand the power of data use.... our ultimate goal is to have the visible data and for me to go in and see that [name] has moved from there to there. (Participant)

Overall, participants reported significant improvement in their knowledge, confidence, and ability to use data effectively.

What Did They Say About the Importance of Being a Lead Learner?

In Scandinavia, the idea of becoming a lead learner was very compelling and widely accepted as a key leadership strategy. In the learning process, participants reflected on their practice and defined the idea in personal terms. For example, one participant defined the idea simply as: “To learn myself, to learn together with teachers, to plan for learning for the teachers, to set time and a place for it...” (Participant). This understanding of the idea resulted in significant changes in practice: “I’ve been more focused on how to do learning processes in my

own school, how to lead learning processes in staff meetings etc., ... and to be a part of the learning myself” (Participant).

Other participants also reported that they were more involved in getting to know what was happening in the classroom, such as the teaching practices and evidence of student learning. One participant provided a particularly powerful account of this change.

...trying to be a support for my teachers in that respect. And that requires me to be where they are, in the classrooms, and being able to share my reflections on how the teaching is going in an open manner. Not to be a judge, but to be a partner, to reflect on teaching practices and how the students are involved in what’s going on, and that is something that I am trying to do more of. (Participant)

Assuming the role of lead learner, although viewed as a laudable goal, was a major challenge. Leaders continued to struggle with balancing administrative tasks with learning tasks, but change was taking place.

Since we attended these modules, I think we, at our school, we started working in a different way, or in a new way, little bit more stronger focus on how to develop our school, not administratively, but in order to increase the quality of our teaching or the education for the students. (Participant)

Regardless of the challenges, the idea of lead learner changed their beliefs and assumptions about the role and, ultimately, changed their practice.

What Did They Say About Relationship Building?

At the outset, Scandinavian participants understood the significance of building strong relationships and trust as a basis for developing people. As one participant commented: “[I] understood that you need to be a people person. You need to understand other people. You need

to motivate. It's about influence and not authority" (Participant). However, the deep focus on relationship building strategies was reported as one of the most significant modules in the program. Indeed, participants described changes in beliefs, assumptions, and practices as a result of the learning.

...we need to have people. You cannot do that alone. You are dependent on others, and my task, sort of, is to try and motivate and involve people so that we can have some shared ideas of what we need to do to make the school better. (Participant)

Clearly, the new learning reaffirmed fundamental beliefs about the importance of relationships while also refining leadership practices.

What Did They Say About Walkthroughs?

Scandinavian participants embraced walkthroughs as an efficient, effective way of finding out what was happening in the classroom and supporting teachers in their goal to improve teaching practices.

I think to stay in a classroom for one hour is ineffective because I get so much information that I can't handle it afterwards. I'm not able to give the teacher effective, good quality feedback after I've stayed in a classroom for one hour....to scan the school by doing walk-throughs in my school is a nice way of get to know the school, get to know the teachers, get to know the needs of the teachers, the needs of the students.
(Participant)

One principal, who enacted this basic practice, reported extending the use of walkthroughs to foster collaboration among teachers. In this case, after completing walkthroughs in multiple classrooms, the principal led a group discussion to provide collective feedback.

It's interesting afterwards, also, that I could give the group of teachers that I've just seen into a collective feedback. 'I saw that when I was visiting your classroom.' 'I observed that you were going to ... while I was observing that when I visited your classroom.' 'That was interesting. How come, or what have you planned before?' 'Did it go the way that you planned for, or was it different when you were there as a teacher in the classroom?' 'How come it was so different when you planned it together?' 'Why did you plan it differently when you planned it together?' (Participant)

What Did They say About Assessment as Learning?

In Scandinavia, the concept of assessment as learning resonated with the participants. Reportedly, leaders were interested in getting the students involved in their own assessment for the purposes of engagement and improved learning.

This year we will concentrate on assessment and we will do assessment as learning and we will do these indicators, and only pick some of them. Then we can go deeper and we can see what do we need to work on and just pick some of that, too. It's very small, and then if they want to they can add more later. (Participant)

Regardless of the focus and effort, implementing practices for assessment as learning remained a challenge.

In the Caribbean

Caribbean participants identified walkthroughs, personal reflections, focus on student achievement, data use, and the concept of a learning organization as powerful ideas that change their practice.

What Did They Say About Walkthroughs?

Utilizing walkthroughs represented the most significant change in practice attributed to the program. In numerous cases, walkthroughs have been substituted for formal classroom observations.

One thing I did bring in, which wasn't there before, was walkthroughs and learning walks, and the difference between doing a walkthrough and doing a formal observation.... We did tons of stuff with the walkthroughs.... The walkthrough stuff was probably the module we used for the project that we did implement here. The walkthrough was very influential. (Participant)

When using walkthroughs, the leaders in the Caribbean described how the focus of the visits shifted.

Making it student-led, focus on the students themselves and what is happening in the classroom, rather than going there to be judgmental" (Participant).

And finally, walkthroughs were attributed to improvements in the collaborative nature of their relationship with teachers.

It's made a huge difference because teachers, I think they embrace the suggestions that you give even more because they know that you're not there to judge them or to evaluate their practice. You're just there to have a look at what's going on and for help.

(Participant)

What Did They Say About Personal Reflection?

Participants learned about the importance of reflecting on their new learning, experiences, and practices by doing it and having the engagement of others, including the instructor:

It's extremely important to be able to self-reflect. ... This particular module I find that made me really reflect a lot on myself. (Participant)

The degree of collaboration, interaction within these groups was really good.
(Participant)

What Did They Say About a Focus on the Student?

Participants offered many comments on the importance of focusing directly on the students and what they are doing in order drive change. Leaders accounted for shifts in their views and practices in efforts to directly support student learning. In fact, strategies were put in place to allow opportunities for students to think about their learning, reflect on their learning, set learning goals and empower themselves to learn.

Seeing my teaching in the eyes, out of the eyes of that child, then that is going to impact how I plan instructions to cater to the needs of my kids. (Participant)

The preparation, of course, but for children to be able to critically look at their work to say, "This is why it's good. What do I need to make better?" Of course, it's more effective feedback when they can give it to themselves. (Participant)

What Did They Say About Using Data?

Participants reported that collecting data was a common occurrence in all schools prior to the program. Further, many claimed a good understanding of the importance of data for school improvement efforts.

We are very good at, like I said, gathering information, but what are we actually doing it for? What are we using it for? How are we using it to move? What are we going to actually try to execute as a result of the data? (Participant)

As a staff, we tend to know the data's there, but we're not really sure of how to look at it in terms of what the baseline is for students, and what the value added is. (Participant)

In fact, what the program provided for leaders was a deeper understanding of the uses of data and specific leadership strategies that could be used to maximize the impact.

I definitely felt like we took away a lot more from the data aspect because we're gathering so much data currently, but we're not using that data. (Participant)

I'm impressed with your data because one of the things I've never done or knew of is that data world. (Participant)

According to participants, the use of data strategies to drive educational decision-making resulted in changes in teacher practice and school culture.

To actually use it, hard-core data, in order to inform practice, to put goals in place, get back to your school improvement plan, et cetera. It was very useful. (Participant)

What Did They Say About the Concept of a Learning Organization?

Participants in the Caribbean described the development of their thinking about learning organizations as opposed to traditional organizations. In addition, these leaders demonstrated a sound understanding of the concept by referring to different aspects of a learning organization when describing their school.

What we did together as a team, we looked at the broad school improvement plan, but we were able to come up with an action plan using that data to support our students.

(Participant)

We pulled a lot into our school with developing a growth mind set. (Participant)

When you're a leader, you want to inspire others to be leaders, not to have a collection of followers.... We also encourage teachers that have the skills to be able to, not just myself,

who is in a leadership position, but to conduct professional development in the staff meetings. So, inquiring as a whole. (Participant)

In Australia

Australian participants identified the following key areas of learning: embracing collaborative learning cultures, the importance of knowing the why, confidence, principal as lead learner, and the impact of data.

What Did They Say About Embracing the Idea of Collaborative Learning Cultures?

Every Australian participant commented about the need to increase collaboration among their staff and how what they learned in the program assisted in achieving this goal. Specifically, these leaders took positive action: “We set up collaborative learning groups and it was focused on the actual research cycle” (Participant). “They’ve got a lot to offer each other, and that’s the empowering part about working together to solve problems about student learning” (Participant). “And that was really good because getting the teachers going around looking at what other teachers were doing, very, very powerful” (Participant), “The collaborative inquiry we’re on our way to doing those sorts of things, creating that culture... you know, the data collection” (Participant).

These leaders also embraced professional learning communities as a structure that builds a trusting and collaborative culture with a clear focus on student achievement. “We’ve created professional learning communities we’ve got four of them, sent them off to team leaders, school improvement PL, it’s four days, two days this term, two days next term with an action type research project attached” (Participant).

What Did They Say About the Importance of Knowing the Why?

Many Australian participants talked about the work of Simon Senek (2011) and the importance of “knowing and sharing your why – purpose and belief” (Participant). The participants summarized “knowing your why” as being able to articulate reasons for implementing changes in their school and explaining the need for the change. “If you can make people understand your why, and if your why is grounded in the understandings of leadership principles, people will follow you because they respect your why” (Participant). Of course, to be impactful, describing one’s why must include the need for collaboration, data use, empowerment, and dedication to students. “I’ve got better at that, explaining to them why the change is needed, showing them that path, you know, and when they can see the why, they’re a lot more willing to partake” (Participant). “So I guess, my plan’s around embedding the practices in the school, so when people come to school, this is what [our school] does. And this is why we do it” (Participant). And as one participant concluded, “...if you’re not passionate about what you’re doing, your why ... if you don’t understand your why, then you might as well just stay in bed” (Participant).

What Did They Say About the Importance of Confidence – Believing in Yourself; Believing in Your Staff

Many participants commented on how the program provided them with the knowledge, skills, and practices required to build even greater confidence as an instructional leader. Two participants nicely summarized the impact.

[The course] gave me confidence, and permission. And, it gave me the eyes to see that that’s where school leadership needed to go.... the leaders being the lead learners and being, you know, being able to walk into a classroom and you still know what’s going on. You know, that’s so, so important. And to have the confidence to address teachers - that

means strategies to address situations where teachers perhaps are not doing their best, or they are doing their best, but they're not doing the best for the kids. (Participant)

The benefits, however, were not limited to just the leaders. Reportedly, this increase in personal confidence on the part of the leader also translated to a greater confidence among the staff themselves, allowing them the autonomy to make decisions, set direction, and assume ownership for their own learning. "I view everybody as proficient until they prove me otherwise. I was able to bring out their strengths and use them effectively within the school. It's more about working with what you've got and building their capacity" (Participant).

Empowering people to look at kids, know them as people and know them really deeply, and then move through putting faces on data, all that kind of stuff, and moving them through that process is really important, but I don't see it as something that I can walk in and do very quickly. (Participant)

What Did They Say About the Importance of Being a Lead Learner?

In Australia, many participants reported some level of understanding of the concept prior to the program. "The impact of an effective school leader sets everything in place" (Participant). "You've got to be a leading learner, you've got to be seen to keep up and drag your staff with you" (Participant).

The program, nevertheless, provided participants with the confidence, resources, and leadership practices to assume the role of lead learner.

Using some of the readings, and also the documentation from the modules, as a planning piece and putting it in front of staff who have to go through the processes bit by bit and break it down, and work through a structured process. (Participant)

What Did They Say About Using Data?

Participants discussed the importance of using data in their schools and how it has influenced the culture of their schools.

Teacher efficacy, getting a better idea of the understanding of really knowing the kids deeply and knowing data, and then moving forward that way. All that sort of personal development stuff as well, understanding the type of leader that I could be and am, and working out where I need to improve, or strengthen, rather than improve. (Participant)

Participants also reported how changes in using data within the school addressed system-level issues.

Because if we're on an improvement process, the data would reflect that and so, you know, they [Department of Education] can have all the data they want because if we're demonstrating that we're on an improvement process, you know, there's nothing to worry about them [Department of Education] having access to the data. (Participant)

What Matters Most

Introduction

When investigating what matters most in the professional learning of school leaders, there are some universal themes that were identified by school leaders across all three international case studies. These themes provide some insight into both the key learnings that school leaders find most important in their professional learning and how this professional learning should be designed and implemented. Given the important influence of effective school leadership on student learning and school improvement (Eacott, 2013; Fuller, Young, & Baker, 2010), this section will explore initially the key learnings that school leaders found most valuable

in their professional development and will then focus on the design and delivery principles that should inform universal school leadership programs.

What Matters Most: Professional Learning

The power of any professional learning endeavor is in how well the learning is translated into practice. When investigating the impact of professional learning on school leaders, it is important to be able to show evidence of how the professional learning has impacted the practice in their school (Asuga et al., 2015; Ng, 2017). The school leaders in the three case studies articulated the complexity of the job as a school leader and expressed, in varying degrees, the lack of quality preparation and training they received in their role. This is consistent with recent evidence that revealed that principals believe training programs do not match with the realities of leadership in modern schools (Devin, 2016). On the contrary, the school leaders that participated in the ISL program were not only positive in relation to their learning in the program but were able to clearly articulate how they used this learning in the leading of their schools.

In the three international case studies detailed above, there were some shared key universal themes that school leaders identified as the most important in terms of the professional learning that impacted their practice in their schools. These were key leadership themes that were consistently identified by school leaders across each of the international case studies as most important. Although the school leaders identified a range of issues relating to professional learning, three universal themes emerged from the case studies that represent the leadership issues that mattered the most to them: focus on students and everybody knowing they are learning; leading in and through relationships; and leading through data.

These universal themes do not act in isolation but are intricately interrelated in how they are applied by the school leaders in the complex and multidimensional context of their schools.

Thus, in further illuminating these universal themes in the next section, the way in which they overlap and interrelate will be accentuated in an effort to show how the principals' key learnings from the ISL program match the realities of leadership in modern schools across the globe.

It is About Students and Everybody Knowing They are Learning

From each of the case studies it is evident that the ISL program activated school leaders into getting back into classrooms - in visiting and spending more time in classrooms and initiating more meaningful interactions with students and teachers. This increased, purposeful interaction through vehicles such as walkthroughs put the learning of students at the forefront, as one school leader commented:

Trying to be a support for my teachers in that respect. And that requires me to be where they are, in the classrooms, and being able to share my reflections on how the teaching is going in an open manner. Not to be a judge, but to be a partner, to reflect on teaching practices and how the students are involved in what's going on, and that is something that I am trying to do more of. (Participant)

The focus on learning and student output is further illustrated by other school leaders in the Caribbean and Australia who said: "Making it student-led, focus on the students themselves and what is happening in the classroom" (Participant) and "empowering people to look at kids, know them as people and know them really deeply" (Participant). This focus on the learner afforded school leaders valuable insight into the student perspective. Purposeful interaction at the classroom level helped to build positive relationships with students and staff alike and provided important insight for school leaders into the quality of instruction of their staff (Easley & Tulowitzki, 2013).

A key point was an active decision on behalf of school leaders to make themselves more available to students and teachers in their classrooms as intimated in the following:

I try to make use of myself. I sit down with the students and ask them what they're learning and the teachers know that and give them an immediate feedback afterwards, just of what I saw. The assessment part is very important because that also goes into the data piece. (Participant)

This is a key outcome of training that brings about practical and proactive change (McCarthy, 2016; Onguko et al., 2008).

Across each of the three case studies, school leaders were taking ownership of the learning in their school community and identifying themselves in the role of lead learner. As one school leader in Scandinavia stated,

I've been more focused on how to do learning processes in my own school, how to lead learning processes in staff meetings etc., to learn myself, to learn together with teachers, to plan for learning for teachers, to set time and a place for it. (Participant)

"You've got to be a leading learner, you've got to be seen to keep up and bring your staff with you," was a further comment from an Australian principal. A principal from the Caribbean summarized this in the following, "So a leader is not just being a dictator, but it's creating that collegial area to support and guide your follow colleagues. And they would be motivated to reach that vision with you."

The notion of being a lead learner was linked to the importance of the learning organization and embracing collaborative learning cultures at the whole school level. A more collective, collegial, and whole school strategic approach emanated from a focus on student learning and captures the essence of "everybody knowing that they are learning." The

“everybody” was found to be critical in the need for increased collaboration of school staff to work together on improving the learning of students. In the Australian case, a school leader identified that the “empowering part about working together to solve problems about student learning” (Participant) and power of “collaborative learning groups helped keep a focus on the action learning cycle” (Participant). In the Caribbean, school leaders commented, “We’re all working within the same system and we need to help each other and collaborate” (Participant) and “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together” (Participant).

It was clear from the three case studies that students and their learning should always be at the center of any learning enterprise. It follows that any professional learning for school leaders should have this as a key focus. The next universal theme identified in each of the case studies was related to more of the “how to” with reference to school leadership and, in part, facilitated a focus on student learning given it related to the importance of leading in and through relationship.

Leading in and Through Relationship: Importance of Developing People and Building Relationships

When identifying what mattered most in the professional learning of school leaders, participants across each of the three international case studies identified leading in and through relationship as most important. Of any of the key learnings described, the importance of developing people and building relationships permeated most of the responses. This may in part be explained by leading in and through relationship as the most significant practical “how to” when it comes to school leadership. Two Scandinavian principals commented,

I'm really into building relationships and the importance of relationships on every level throughout the school and throughout the systems to make people work together. Because we really need to trust each other before we can really develop anything that resonates with everyone. (Participant)

When I kind of learned more and understood that you need to be a people person. You need to understand other people. You need to motivate. It's about influence and not authority. (Participant)

Leading in and through relationship is consistent with Piggot-Irvine and Youngs (2011) who highlighted the importance of school leadership training programs developing inter- and intrapersonal skills. Schaefer (2015) also asserted that connecting with others was one of the most effective ways one can lead.

Among the three case studies, there was an emphasis on the value of building trust, as outlined by one of the Australian principals.

So the behaviours of high trust leaders was really interesting. I think I exhibit a few of those, which it was just good to have them highlighted and it makes me just think about when I'm dealing with staff, and working with staff and, how it was coming through. (Participant)

The building of trust was found to support bringing staff together to collaborate around the ultimate goal of student success. As one principal from the Caribbean commented, "Develop that level of trust so we could collaborate more for the benefit of our kids. That's the ultimate goal: student success" (Participant). This notion was echoed by an Australian principal who described the power of teachers learning from each other, "they've got a lot to offer each other, and that's the empowering part about working together to solve problems about student learning"

(Participant). As seen earlier from one principal from Scandinavia, “we really need to trust each other before we can really develop anything that resonates with everyone” (Participant), highlighting the importance of a collaborative whole school approach to student learning.

There was also a sense of leading in and through relationships, empowering others to take leadership over student learning. As one principal commented, “When you’re a leader, you want to inspire others to be leaders, not to have a collection of followers” (Participant). Another principal commented, “It’s all about empowering others to become leaders” (Participant). For many principals, relational trust empowered the ownership of student learning by everybody, which in turn empowered decision-making around quality learning from a more collaborative and targeted approach. Positive relationships built upon trust helped bring staff together to collaborate on a whole school approach to student learning. This was found to support effective change in the schools, as supported by Schaefer (2015) who argued good leaders are better able to support change and work with more diverse teams.

Leading Through Data: Instruction is the Leadership / Informed by Data / Data Does the Leading

It was evident that the use of data to support learning and teaching also mattered most in the professional learning of school leaders for principals across the three case studies. Each case presented a strong exposition of the use of data to inform the learning enterprise within each school.

For a number of principals, a key issue was to help their teachers understand the importance of student data and to build capacity on how to use the data to support learning. As one school leader from the Caribbean described,

The issue that we've had more than anything else is just getting teachers familiar with that data, and familiar with what it means if the students are going up a level, for example, and are they giving value added.... teachers are setting targets based on that.

(Participant)

Further to this was the notion that many school leaders "took away a lot more from the data aspect because we're gathering so much data currently, but we're not using that data"

(Participant).

Leading through data was found to be a further key mechanism to develop a focus on student learning and outcomes of school leaders, as one principal summarized:

How do we inform them of where they are? What are the next steps? What can you do to move a step further? Have we, or are we providing the support these kids need? Because all kids are not the same. They learn at a different pace. They have different abilities.

They have different needs. (Participant)

There was also agreement between the principals across the cases that data "is the starting point for change" (Participant) and "we get a rich variety of information we can base our decisions on" (Participant). One principal from the Caribbean elaborated,

That important use of data, not just to overload and collect but to use it to inform any decision that takes place as it relates to the teaching and learning. It added value, really, to my understanding of data and how to use that data to create effect, to effect change.

(Participant)

The use of data also had an impact on teacher efficacy as a principal in Australia commented, "Teacher efficacy, getting a better idea of the understanding of really knowing the kids deeply and knowing data, and then moving forward that way" (Participant).

The notions of *effecting change* to student learning and ‘moving forward’ was in the context of teachers working together and collaborating on the use of data from a whole of school perspective as one principal described, “It wasn’t about the individual teacher or the teacher’s role in it, it was everybody’s input into that child” (Participant). As two school leaders further elaborated,

We got into data and what it’s really about with all the perspectives and all the things you observe and all the conversations you have. All the things that you know, making the whole picture.... They are inspired to continue to understand the power of data use....our ultimate goal is to have the visible data and for me to go in to each class and see that this student has moved from there to there. (Participant)

Leading in and though data was also linked to fostering the learning organization and or embracing collaborative learning cultures based on positive relationships of trust as a principal in Australia outlined, “The collaborative inquiry we’re on our way to doing those sorts of things, creating that culture, through the professional learning communities and, you know, the data collection” (Participant). Another school leader commented, “What we did together as a team, we looked at the broad school improvement plan, but we were able to come up with an action plan using that data to support our students” (Participant).

It was clear that for many principals leading through data further empowered the ownership of student learning by everybody, which in turn empowered decision-making around quality learning from a more collaborative and targeted approach. Positive relationships built upon trust helped bring staff together to constructively use data to inform a whole school approach to student learning, which was found to support effective change in the schools. This positive change was not only related to student achievement but to the culture and organization

of the schools around quality learning and teaching at the individual student, classroom, and school level.

This section identified three universal themes that school leaders found the most important in terms of the professional learning that impacted their practice in their schools. These themes were found to be intricately interrelated in how they were applied by school leaders in the complex and multidimensional context of their schools and further demonstrated how the ISL program effectively supported school leaders to successfully deal with the realities of school leadership in modern schools across the globe. The next section will explore what matters most for school leaders when it comes to the design and delivery principles that should inform universal school leadership programs.

What Matters Most: Program Design and Delivery

As indicated above, evidence from the three international case studies pointed to a number of universal principles for the design and delivery of professional learning for school leaders. The guiding principles that focus on program structure, content, instructional strategies, instructors, and participants are interrelated and tightly connected. Arguably, all must be applied in concert to achieve excellence.

What Matters Most in Terms of Program Structure?

Overall, the program structure should address the realities of the challenging jobs of the participants in terms of availability, amount of time required, organization of content, and assessment demands. One participant in particular captured the issue:

[it] was good in that, whilst it was online, and it was a time commitment to do it online, you could sit down and do it, you know, a bit each night, which is like half-an-hour to an hour. And it didn't feel like I'd have to sit down each night for three or four hours and,

you know, slog my way through it, you knew you could come home, you could just go, yeah, okay, I'm going to spend an hour now and do this, and do it comfortably, so I felt the online bit was paced well. (Participant)

Utilizing a blend of online, onsite, and hybrid delivery is an important strategy in providing this flexibility. Even with onsite delivery, an online environment can be used to manage content, establish ongoing collaboration, record reflections, and generally extend the learning: “the face-to-face modules were fantastic for that [collaboration], and maintaining that after the time has been really good”(Participant).

We further suggest that it is important to organize the program in discrete units of study, tied together by an overarching conceptual framework. This framework needs to reflect a current and inspirational image of the school leader and, most importantly, must provide participants with the fundamental building blocks for learning: “this is kind of what ISL has done for me. It's kind of given me the big picture. It has made me see the cohesion” (Participant). Relatedly, we believe a certificate structure offers the ability to bind all of the components into a thoughtful, comprehensive learning experience: “... everything else I'd done was a workshop here and a workshop there” (Participant).

Time is another key consideration in program design. Evidence indicated that participants required time between units to not only reflect on and consolidate their learning, but time to apply the new learning. Consequently, in establishing the overall length of the program, the time between the learning sessions must be appropriately planned, considering both the school year calendar and demands on the leader. As one participant commented: “And that's probably one of, whether it's conscious or unconscious, [the] effects of doing the program over such a long

period of time you can actually be doing it, you're experimenting on your own school"

(Participant).

What Matters Most in Terms of Content?

Comments from participants also revealed the importance of providing tools that can be utilized with little or no modification by the leader. These tools, including frameworks, articles, and process models, are all designed to be used with teaching staff. For participants, these provided actionable items: "It was a functional PD, I think, for me, it was something I could come back and use straight away" (Participant).

Programs should also provide for the inclusion of local resources and priorities: "I think having that local context will help the program, so it's sort of less Canadian" (Participant). That stated, tools, research, and literature from around the world are highly valued: "the readings were good. They were relevant, and they were focused on what we were doing and what we needed at the time" (Participant). Participants, in fact, make sense of specific resources in their context during discussions, reflections, and applications.

What Matters Most in Terms of Instructional Strategies?

In designing and delivering the learning experience for leaders, it is critical to demonstrate strategies that can be directly replicated by the school leader in their own school. As noted by one participant: "the practical assignments we were given and [I] probably used every one of them with my staff and colleagues" (Participant). Another participant further suggested: "It's the strategies that we are using in different topics that we could use with staff and the staff could, in the end, use it with their students."

These strategies should be based on adult learning principles, with opportunities for reading, listening, speaking, reflection, movement, collaboration, and discussion: "The way it

was run, the collegiality, to be able to work in the groups and to have the conversations and work through it, it was great” (Participant). Further, participants need to be given the opportunity to discuss the strategies from the perspective of a facilitator. And finally, programs should require participants to demonstrate deep reflection on the content, process, and potential for application in the leadership role. One participant nicely summarizes:

It was a good presentation backed by research and video clips and you know, it was interactive and fun. The pace was always kind of changing.... did an excellent job of that, but then that I could take away and actually have some goodies that I can try out and actually use other than just the research. (Participant)

Programs also need to provide for a culminating project that requires the participant to apply their new learning to a real leadership challenge, with the guidance of the instructor and mentor: “I think the ultimate thing that probably had the biggest impact directly on this school was the actual project that we had to develop” (Participant). “I feel like ISL gives me kind of an action plan and it's about doing things for the teachers that I would like them to do in the classroom” (Participant).

What Matters Most in Terms of Instructors?

The best participants, content, strategies, and structure matter, but what matters the most is likely the quality of the program instructor. In judging quality, evidence points to a number of indicators that should guide selection processes. First, instructors need to have evidence of excellence in the role of school leader and be able to provide actionable feedback: “[instructors] were really, really good, and the feedback from them was always really good... actionable feedback... it’s not just been words, it's been actionable” (Participant). Second, instructors need to have extensive experience in teaching adults and understand their learning needs: “very

experienced and hands-on and you didn't feel like you were being lectured to" (Participant). " [Instructors] have been really flexible... "I haven't been able to do this, I'm definitely going to finish it, but I just haven't got there," and as long as you communicate, I guess, they've been flexible" (Participant). And, finally, instructors need to demonstrate a passion and commitment to the learning of others with evidence of long-term mentoring relationships that reach beyond the confines of the program expectations: "having a mentor that takes care of you in that way that [instructor] does. If you have any questions, that, "Oh, I'll send you an article about that." You feel it's like a never-ending support that you're going to get. It's great" (Participant).

What Matters Most in Terms of Participants?

Although literature points to the establishment of homogenous cohorts based on a rigorous selection process (Hallinger et al., 2018), thereby creating professional learning connections with a common understanding of the role, research, and strategies, our research suggested that it may not be the cohort model that is critical, but rather the degree of collaboration within the local organizational culture. For example, in Scandinavia, the delivery model did not involve the creation of a cohort. Rather, individuals joined the onsite and online modules as time permitted, with some degree of overlap among the participants; however, collaboration among participants from various districts was reported. In the Caribbean, the delivery involved cohorts, including principals, deputies, and aspiring school leaders. However, collaboration among one another was reported to a lesser degree. It may be that the culture of the district was not conducive to collaboration or that the mandatory participation influenced the level of collaboration. In contrast, in the Australian case, collaboration among the participants was reported as a very important aspect of the program and many other examples of connections within the district were cited. The research, therefore, suggested that the cohort model of

delivery does not guarantee broad collaboration nor is it required to achieve high levels of professional learning connections.

Our research also found that the nature of the impact of the program varies from one participant to another based on prior learning, prior experience, context, tenure, and opportunity to enact new or modified practices. Indeed, the impact on the practices of school leaders is now understood as a multilayer continuum that traces the level of impact against certain criteria such as role, tenure in role and/or school, school culture, and prior knowledge. Each participant, therefore, regardless of characteristics, experiences the same learning, but applies it to practice in very different ways. This finding makes a strong argument for heterogeneous groupings or at least the questioning of the homogenous arrangement.

The size of the cohort is another factor to consider. With groups of 12 to 30, the aims of the program can be met with important bonding between participants. Perhaps more importantly, the connection between the instructor and the individual participants can be maximized, thereby setting the stage for a mentoring relationship (noted above) after the conclusion of the program.

The principle that emerges from this discussion is to create programs for and delivered to heterogeneous groupings of leaders, thereby ensuring the diversity of learners in order to elevate dissonance and the quality of discussions.

What is Next

The findings of our inquiry naturally led to what should happen next in terms of school leader practice and further research in quality design and delivery of universal principal professional learning. In answer, we offer the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Providers of programs should use the key points of learning and universal design principles to assess and modify current programs, as well as to create new ones.

In this application process, it is critical to integrate these two components to ensure an educative process that models the key learnings.

In particular, school leadership programs should provide for a culminating activity that extends beyond the typical capstone project. It needs to be more than the intellectual and academic experience of applying new knowledge to a problem of practice in collaboration with the instructor and mentor. It must be a plan that is executed within their role, supported by a mentor, and aligned with school priorities, thereby providing the pinnacle of learning opportunities.

Recommendation 2: Future research should continue to focus on what matters the most in professional learning for school leaders in terms of program structure, content, strategies, instructor, and participants. Today's answers may not reflect the leadership needs in the future.

Recommendation 3: Future research should probe the issue of universal design principles for fully online leadership programs.

Conclusions

The three international case studies have provided insight into what matters most for school leaders in their professional learning and the design and implementation of this professional learning. Three key learnings found to matter most for school leaders included, It is about students and everybody knowing they are learning; Leading in and through relationship; and Leading through data. A number of universal design principles were also identified as mattering most for school leaders that will help inform current programs and the development of future professional learning for school leaders. These highlight the importance of program structure, context, instructional strategies, instructor, and participants. The integration of key

learnings with the design principles in an educative process that models the key learnings was also found to be important.

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