



INTERNATIONAL
SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

How to Realize the Dream of Online Learning for School Leaders: Lessons Learned from African Principals

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to better understand the challenges and opportunities of online learning from the perspective of African school principals. We probe a variety of related issues to develop a deeper understanding: existing infrastructure, learning management system, requisite technical skills, course structure and delivery method, applicability of content, impact on practices, instructor qualities, training needs, assessments and collaboration across political and cultural boundaries. Further, in order to understand the issues at a deeper level, we compare the perspectives of the African principals to a group of leaders from international schools in three countries outside of Africa.

The creation of a pilot, online course, based on an existing program offered by International School Leadership, provided the context for the study. This pilot offered an opportunity for exploring the challenges and opportunities from a common, online experience.

Three key questions guided the study:

1. What are the African principals' perspectives of the online learning experience?
2. How do the African principals' perspectives compare to those of school leaders from international schools?
3. What design and delivery principles should guide online offerings for African principals?

In the end, we reveal some interesting differences in perspective and argue that realizing the dream of online learning for African principals requires that content, design, and delivery must be contextualized – anything else will fall short!

Selected Literature

After a fairly extensive search, we conclude that a dearth of research exists to inform our current study, both in terms of online learning and professional learning for African principals. However, we do draw upon several studies to better understand the extent to which content needs to be contextualized to address the realities of African school principals, the benefits of online versus onsite learning, and the principles that should guide the delivery and design of online courses.

One argument for the contextualization of professional learning is premised on the notion that what is required of a school leader varies from one context to another; and, hence, professional learning must be contextualized to meet their needs. The question that arises, therefore is: what are the practices of leaders within developing countries? Two selected studies in particular address this question. First, in a meta-analysis, Oplatka (2004) examined twenty seven papers on leadership styles and the managerial aspects of the principal's role in developing countries and found some common features in school principalship: "limited autonomy, autocratic leadership style, summative evaluation, low degree of change initiation, and lack of instructional leadership functions" (Oplatka, 2004, p.427). He asserts that "principals from poor developing countries (mainly from Africa) are preoccupied with the satisfaction of basic needs and functions that most principals in western countries, presumably, have never included in their role definition" (Oplatka, 2004, p. 432). Second, and in alignment with the previous study, Verret (2017) argues that there are common leadership characteristics of small, fragile, and developing countries in that they all tend to have "weak and deteriorating governance, fragile situations of prolonged crises, post-conflict or political transition, high security risks, and threats to development or low development status" (Verret, 2017, p. 46).

These studies portray a picture of school leadership in developing countries; however, are these conditions exclusive to these contexts? We contend that the answer is no - similar conditions and leadership practices can be found in many jurisdictions around the

world. Consequently, we argue that professional learning opportunities should not be restricted and defined by the specific context. Indeed, as Mestry (2017) suggests, we must provide: “innovative leadership development programmes [to] help prepare school leaders to apply creative approaches that address the broader roles and responsibilities of leaders and the purpose of schooling, and to use core technologies to achieve intended outcomes” (Mestry, 2017, p. 8).

In the absence of research specific to online learning for school leaders, we draw upon two recent studies that probe the online experience of teachers, Parsons et al. (2019) and Yurkofsky et al. (2019). These studies provide important insights into teacher perceptions about the benefits of online learning. First, although convenience is cited as a major advantage of online learning, voluntary participation is viewed as an important component. Parsons et al. (2019) suggest that this is the same for both online and onsite learning experiences. Second, teachers report that online learning offers the opportunity to connect with others, within and outside of their respective jurisdictions. Indeed, Yurkofsky et al. (2019) argue that these connections produce a broad range of benefits such as:

enhanced feelings of validation and diminished feelings of isolation, attributing these feelings to the connections they made through the [online] course. Such outcomes may not translate into specific knowledge or changes in practice, but can enhance teacher satisfaction, commitment, and retention. (p. 10)

Yurkofsky et al. (2019) further suggest that:

While many teachers in our study described how gaining knowledge and skills might prompt changes in practice and engagement with the world, this was just one of many trajectories teachers emphasized. For example, many teachers asserted that access to a broader professional community helped introduce them to new ideas or improve aspects of their practice. Additionally, although learning new ideas could result in changed practices, sometimes it was the validation of existing practices they experienced in the course that gave teachers the confidence and support to engage with their world of work in new ways. (p.10)

Third, online learning offers flexibility, time, and the opportunity for reflection, with a shift from a knowledge acquisition focus to the application of new learning. It is the designed flexibility that allows participants to set their own pace, focus on the most relevant, and apply (Parson, et al., 2019, p.34), all with the support of colleagues and the instructor.

What then are the principles that should guide the delivery and design of online courses? Numerous studies (Parsons et al. 2019, Poquet et al., 2018; Smith & Sivo, 2012) propose that the design of social and teacher presence are key components. In fact, Parsons et al. (2019) argue that potential benefits of online learning can only be realized with clear attention to the social and teacher presence.

The concepts of social and teacher presence offer an important window into design principals. Parsons et al., (2019) provide illuminating insight:

Social presence interactions can take many forms including sharing work, asynchronous discussions, and real-time conversation through social media.

Through these interactions, teachers can develop relationships with others online, expand their professional networks, and foster learning. (p.34)

Teacher presence refers to the role of the instructor or creator of the online PD. It includes: (a) course design and organization, (b) role as facilitator, and (c) direct instruction they provide (Wendt & Courduff, 2018). Research on online PD has found that individuals believe they are learning content and are more motivated to do so when a positive, consistent teacher presence has been established (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Baker, 2010). Additionally, increased amounts of teacher presence often leads to higher degrees of satisfaction and overall sense of community on the part of participants (Ladyshevsky, 2013). (p.34)

Scott and Byrne (in press) offer a deep understanding of instructors in onsite delivery that arguably provides insight into the online environment:

First, instructors need to have evidence of excellence in the role of school leader and be able to provide actionable feedback Second, instructors need to have extensive experience in teaching adults 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 program expectations. (in press)

Scott and Byrne (in press) also set out a number of additional design principles for onsite delivery that may inform the design of online opportunities:

1. professional learning opportunities must address the realities of the challenging jobs held by participants;
2. time is a key consideration in order to allow for reflection, discussion, and application;
3. the importance of providing actionable content, with processes, tools, resources that can be immediately applied;
4. that multiple instructional strategies are employed to provide for reading, listening, speaking, reflecting, collaborating, and discussing – the social presence; and
5. heterogeneous groups offer excellent learning environments, although cohort sizes should be limited for the maximization of interactions. (in press)

Although limited in numbers, these selected studies provide a theoretical understanding of the realities of African school principals, the anticipated benefits of online versus, and the principles that should guide the delivery and design of online courses. These understandings guide the analysis of our data and the development of recommendations.

Methodology

Selection of School Leaders

The international school leaders, from England, Switzerland, and England, were self-selected by registering online for the module. Eight school leaders from East Africa were invited to join the pilot.

The Pilot

The online, pilot course was International School Leadership's Module 1, delivered to hundreds of school leaders from around the world, over the past six years. The content focuses on leadership for the purposes of improving schools and, ultimately, student achievement. The Learning Management System (LMS) is Canvas, an internationally recognized LMS that is very robust and easy to access as a learner. The module runs for five weeks, requiring two to three hours per week for participants to remain in sync with other cohort members. The instructional strategies include a variety of resources, key questions for exploration, probes to cause participants to interact with one another, a web conference, and a final reflective paper. Participants are expected to complete all segments of the module and the final reflection that is assessed by the instructor. In this case, the instructor is a seasoned, online teacher who has delivered the module multiple times. And finally, the module concludes with the participants completing a module evaluation survey.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collected includes instructor notes, participants' reflections and module evaluation surveys. The survey included twelve questions that are presented in Figure 1. The reflections were prompted by three questions: What? (what they learned), So What? (why it mattered), and Now What? (how their leadership practices might change). And, the instructor notes were created over the duration of the module (recorded personal reflections and emails to participants).

The survey results were analyzed for the two distinct groups of participants: international school leaders and principals from Africa. For each group, responses were calculated as averages, frequencies, and, for open-ended questions, themes were identified. In addition, key quotes were identified for potential use in describing the overall responses.

Results

Initially, eleven school leaders (three from international schools and eight from African schools) were sent invitations to join the online module. All eleven had received prior communication to confirm their connection and commitment to join the learning experience. In the end, seven school leaders completed the module (three from international schools and four from African schools). The four principals from Africa who did not complete the module participated at various levels: less than one hour, one hour, three hours, and eight hours.

African Principals' Survey Results

All four African Principals who completed the program provided responses to key questions to probe their perceptions (Figure 1).

With an average rating of 3.3 out of 5 (the highest), African principals reported relative ease in managing the navigation of the module; however, in terms of the demands of the reading and writing components, the group was split: two principals found the requirements 'somewhat easy,' while two reported 'somewhat difficult.'

In explaining their rankings of the navigation and demands for reading and writing, principals suggested that the structure of the module and the support of the instructor were vital components in manageability for the participants.

The cited benefits of online learning versus face-to-face are somewhat expected given the literature that identifies convenience as the key consideration. It is noteworthy that sharing experiences with others, particularly in other countries, was an important benefit. The relative cost of the two delivery methods was also viewed as an advantage.

One main disadvantage was the range of disruptions that interfered with the learning process: internet connection, delay in responses from fellow participants and issues arising during the time to be dedicated to the online learning. These disruptions had a negative impact on the discourse and reportedly limited the ability to probe and develop a deeper understanding. Participants also reported the absence of a physical presence and the associated emotional connects as a disadvantage.

Although the LMS provides for participants to use audio and video for response, written submissions were the most common.

The African principals were also asked how the level of interaction between the participants could be improved. In response, participants suggested a greater use of video conferencing, exchange of email addresses, and the public posting of instructor emails to individuals.

The quality of instruction was rated as excellent (n=3) and very good (n=1).

The price for such an online course was also probed. In response, African principals indicated that the \$335 USD price was somewhat affordable, but all indicated a lower price is preferred.

In response to the question about technology related issues, the African principals cited internet connection, speed and stability, as the most common issue. Others reported hardware and software issues as well.

And finally, African principals expressed appreciation for the opportunity.

Figure 1: African Principals' Survey Results

1. How easy did you navigate around the module? (5 Very easy, 4 somewhat easy, 3 manageable, 2 somewhat difficult, 1 very difficult)

Very easy (n=2)

Somewhat easy (n=1)

Manageable (n=1)

Average: 4 out of 5

2. How difficult did you find the course in terms of the reading and writing requirements? (5 Very easy, 4 somewhat easy, 3 manageable, 2 somewhat difficult, 1 very difficult)

Very easy

Somewhat easy (n=2)

Manageable

Somewhat difficult (n=2)

Very difficult

Average 3.5 of 5

3. Explain how you rated the difficulty of the reading and writing requirements.

- I feel that both the reading and writing required for this module was just right. The amount of content which needs to be read I feel is chosen purposely so that you need to read the important parts related to a specific concept.

I enjoy the mixture of both videos, readings and also the interaction which is required amongst all participants.

- At times I found it difficult to track assignments, especially after I had completed them but still needed to go back and reply to others comments. As I had submitted them they didn't appear in my to do so I had to click through a series of menus to find them again
- I did not find the module difficult because it is structured in such a way that it is easy to follow. The instructions are very clear, the illustrations and examples given are quite appropriate.
- The module was quite easy to navigate and a lot of assistance was provided by the instructor. A small challenge arose whenever other colleagues failed to make responses on time to enable others make their comments.

4. List the benefits of online learning:

- It is self paced
- Sharing of experiences and having a record of them.
- One is able to do it according to one's convenience (n=4)
- One is able to interact with people from different countries
- Saves you from travel expenses and other costs

5. List the disadvantages of online learning compared to face-to-face opportunities:

- Other activities tend to disrupt the smooth flow of the course
- Poor internet connection may slow one's progress
- The physical interaction between the instructors and the students is missed
- Fewer ideas are generated online since instant probing and exchange is not possible
- Sometimes the chats/discussion forums didn't feel much like discussions because of the different times that people had completed it. I might have been right into a topic when I read and wrote my entry but then it might have lost a bit of focus when I went back a couple of days later
- I guess it would just be reading the body language of others during discussions and having the immediate discourse and feedback. However, this is supplemented with the web chat and I believe that for this sort of material, having the time to read and reflect and think before responding is quite critical

6. What method of communication with others did you use most often?

- Written response (n=4)

7. What changes in the module would improve the interaction with your colleagues and instructor?

- Video conferencing
- I would love to see the instructor's feedback and questions on the board, rather than just privately for individuals. I know that my feedback and further questioning by the instructor has been invaluable... think about how much more we would get if we all had it all to see and reflect upon
- I feel it would be nice to maybe have the option for participants to upload more videos and possibly have the option of sharing each others e-mails as I feel it's fundamental to create valuable networks throughout the world

8. Please rate the quality of instruction:

Excellent (n=3)

Very Good (n=1)

9. Each online module costs \$335 USD. How affordable is this amount in your context?

Affordable (n=2)

Somewhat affordable (n=2)

10. In thinking about the technology required to complete the module, please select issues that confronted you.

unstable internet (n=2)
quality of computer
internet speed too slow
browser problems

11. Do you have any general comments you would like to share?

- I enjoyed the course and would be willing to take on another module in case I pass this one
- It's just fantastic in every way
- Nothing to add here. My tech set up worked nicely and I enjoyed the content of the module
- The only issue I personally had was to upload my intro video. After various tries I managed.

African Principals' Reflections

All four African principals completed the end-of-module reflection, thereby revealing what they learned, why it mattered, and how their leadership practices might change.

One particular African principal nicely captured the significance of the course content and the challenge in identifying a few key concepts: "To be honest, all the concepts discussed in this module have made a difference in my thinking about how to work as principal..." (African principal). Nevertheless, principals identified their top three.

The #1 What: Instructional Leadership

Vivian Robinson's concept of student-centred leadership radiated throughout all of the reflections. One participant clearly sets out the what, so what and now what:

What? The core business of a school being the teaching/learning processes, I was touched by Viviane Robinson's statement that "leadership is often judged by the leader's relationship with the adults when effective leadership should be measured by the leader's impact on student outcomes"

So What? ...so, emphasis should be put on those practices that ensure students achievement and well-being.

Now what? Since the general status quo is to judge leadership by the principal's relationship with adults, I should therefore sensitize them into changing their focus toward student achievement and well-being through creating and communicating a vision. In other words I would work to recruit them on the team whose focus would be the student since according to Viviane Robinson, "education is team business." (African principal)

Several other principals reflected on the impact of the idea of integrating instructional leadership with management:

So what: Before I started this module, I took my role as Head teacher to be more of a managerial than instructional leadership. I have learnt that to be an effective Principal, I need to balance the two.

Now what: I have taken note of Dr. Alvy and Dr. Robbins' strategies to combine the two effectively. I will emphasize maximising the quality of instruction and focus more on student growth while ensuring teacher success in order to foster deeper learning. (African principal)

The #2 What: Leadership Frameworks

The leadership frameworks from Ontario and Australia were highlighted by three of the principals:

So What? The idea of having and being guided by a leadership framework impressed me because here in Uganda we do not seem to have one! It is important for the principal to support the “relationship between standards of practice, knowledge and skills, emotional intelligence, and the unrelenting focus on improving student achievement.”

Now what? I will adapt and contextualise the ISL framework and use it as a tool to guide our practice. (African principal)

Another principal provides further insight into the impact of the leadership frameworks:

So what? It was my first encounter with such a tool. I particularly liked the ISL framework for its clarity on the expectations of a school leader. A study of the themes in the Ontario and Australian frameworks gave me deeper insight on leadership effectiveness.

Now what? I will use the frameworks as tools for self evaluation and integrate the major themes in my leadership practice. My priority will be on setting direction and building productive working relationships with all stakeholders to create a collaborative culture for the good of our school. (African principal)

The #3 What: Positive Contagion

And, finally, ‘positive contagion’ was identified as a key concept by three principals:

So what? I work in a resource-constrained environment where one can not make big changes. The power of small changes creating excitement that leads to big pay offs would be of great advantage to me.

Now what? Whenever am faced with a challenge, I will use any glimpse of a way out as an opportunity to ignite the wild fire effect of positive contagion. (African principal)

And, another principal states:

So what? [It] contagion encourages staff to share success stories during meetings which 'tickles' others to want to share. I believe it also opens new approaches for improvement on instruction.

Now what? Adopt the idea of sharing success stories once every month in the staffroom, identify, discuss lessons learned and what would have been done better. (African principal)

Without question, positive contagion is a key 'What' of the module:

So What? [It] is an interesting idea. It has taught me that I don't have to feel defeated; any little change I make is capable of bringing about great results provided I involve staff and students and make them realize that our efforts are not in vain.

Now What? To ensure positive contagion, I'll involve teachers in all activities to improve work morale. (African principal)

Instructor Notes

Notes from the instructor provide additional insights into how the online module unfolded and reveal a series of issues distinctive to the African cohort: first few days, meeting time requirements, web conference, and finishing the module.

The first days of the module were particularly problematic for the African principals. In fact, it took a lot of support and follow-up from the instructor to get everyone started. The creation of a personal video introduction took about eight days for the group to complete, thereby delaying the start of the program and frustrating many. Several of the African principals also required the additional technical support from ISL to access the module even though they had signed in earlier. On multiple occasions, the instructor also sent out follow-up emails to those who were merely signing into the course and viewing content; these attempts and offers to help learners catch up did not get those few non-participating principals on board. Regardless of this unusual level of support, 50 per cent of the African principals did not complete the first weeks of the program.

Other issues prevalent throughout the instructor's interactions with the participants were deadlines, for responding or submitting various assignments. The instructor frequently offered help and guidance on how much time to dedicate each week, how to access assignments, and, generally, how to be successful. The instructor also showed a lot of flexibility in terms of deadlines and ISL decided to modify the opening and due dates of assignments to make up for the 8-day delay from the beginning of the module. Even with these changes, it was necessary to further extend the deadline for the submission of the final reflection.

The web conference, designed to facilitate “the sharing of additional content and dialogue between participants and the instructor” (instructor) also became an issue. Despite multiple emails sent out by the instructor to remind participants of the date and time of the web conference and to inform them of the technical requirements, only two people attended the full hour; one participant got in half way through but did not complete the hour and another participant in Africa, emailed the instructor to state that they could not access the web conference due to Internet connection issues. Although the web conference was recorded for use after the event, an important learning opportunity was missed: “ [participants] should not be given the alternative of getting a recorded version” (African Principal) and that is the reason that the majority opted for the recorded version.

And finally, the instructor found it a struggle to draw the module to closure with all four African principals completing the reflection and module evaluation:

We trust this finds you balancing the many demands upon your time and energy. Just checking in to see if you have a timeline in mind to complete Module 1. There is still time however, we do hope to begin wrapping things up within the next 2-3 weeks. (Instructor)

In the end, despite the challenges of the first few days, time and deadlines, the web conference and closing the module, all four African principals completed the module.

Comparison of African Principal Survey Responses to School Leaders from International Schools

The comparison of the responses (Figure 2) presents some interesting findings. First, in terms of easy of navigating the module and the difficulty of the reading and writing assignments, the African principals reported a lower level of difficulty. Second, for the two groups, the advantages and disadvantages were very similar. Third, technology related issues negatively affected the experience of the African principals, while not impacting the international school leaders. Fourth, in terms of the price for the module, no difference existed in the response. And, finally, regardless of the technical issues, all enjoyed the experience.

Figure 2: African Principals’ and International School Leaders’ Survey Results

1. How easy did you navigate around the module? (5 Very easy, 4 somewhat easy, 3 manageable, 2 somewhat difficult, 1 very difficult)

African principals:	International school leaders:
Very easy (n=2)	(n=1)
Somewhat easy (n=1)	(n=1)
Manageable (n=1)	(n=1)
Average: 4 out of 5	3.3 out of 5

2. How difficult did you find the course in terms of the reading and writing requirements?
 (5 Very easy, 4 somewhat easy, 3 manageable, 2 somewhat difficult, 1 very difficult)

African principals:	International school leaders:
Very easy	
Somewhat easy (n=2)	Somewhat easy
Manageable	
Somewhat difficult (n=2)	Somewhat difficult (n=2)
Very difficult	
Average 3.5 of 5	2.7 out of 5

3. Explain how you rated the difficulty of the reading and writing requirements.

International School Leaders

- At times I found it difficult to track assignments, especially after I had completed them but still needed to go back and reply to others comments. (International school leader)
- It all depends on what you put into it. You get out of these courses what you choose to put into it. I can manage the workload, but I like to get as much as possible out of it, so I am often reading other material related to what has been presented afterward and having further discussions with colleagues around the globe on these matters in order to enrich the experience. (International school leader)

African Principals

- I feel that both the reading and writing required for this module was just right. The amount of content which needs to be read, I feel, is chosen purposely so that you need to read the important parts related to a specific concept.

I enjoy the mixture of both videos, readings and also the interaction which is required amongst all participants.

- At times I found it difficult to track assignments, especially after I had completed them but still needed to go back and reply to others comments. As I had submitted them they didn't appear in my to do so I had to click through a series of menus to find them again
- I did not find the module difficult because it is structured in such a way that it is easy to follow. The instructions are very clear, the illustrations and examples given are quite appropriate.

- The module was quite easy to navigate and a lot of assistance was provided by the instructor. A small challenge arose whenever other colleagues failed to make responses on time to enable others make their comments.

4. List the benefits of online learning:

International School Leaders

- Very similar to the African principals' responses
- Time to read and think before responding

African Principals

- It is self paced
- Sharing of experiences and having a record of them.
- One is able to do it according to one's convenience (n=4)
- One is able to interact with people from different countries
- Saves you from travel expenses and other costs

5. List the disadvantages of online learning compared to face-to-face opportunities:

International School Leaders

- Discussions imbedded by candidate delays in responding
- Lack of body language and emotional connections
- Limited networking

African Principals

- Other activities tend to disrupt the smooth flow of the course
- Poor internet connection may slow one's progress
- The physical interaction between the instructors and the students is missed
- Fewer ideas are generated online since instant probing and exchange is not possible
- Sometimes the chats/discussion forums didn't feel much like discussions because of the different times that people had completed it. I might have been right into a topic when I read and wrote my entry but then it might have lost a bit of focus when I went back a couple of days later
- I guess it would just be reading the body language of others during discussions and having the immediate discourse and feedback. However, this is supplemented with the web chat and I believe that for this sort of material, having the time to read and reflect and think before responding is quite critical

6. What method of communication with others did you use most often?

International School Leaders

- Written response (n=3)

African Principals

- Written response (n=4)

7. What changes in the module would improve the interaction with your colleagues and instructor?

International School Leaders

- I would love to see the instructor's feedback and questions on the board, rather than just privately for individuals. I know that my feedback and further questioning by the instructor has been invaluable... think about how much more we would get if we all had it all to see and reflect upon
- I feel it would be nice to maybe have the option for participants to upload more videos and possibly have the option of sharing each others e-mails as I feel it's fundamental to create valuable networks throughout the world

African

- Video conferencing
- The "live" web conference should be given more importance and probably two of them. Students should not be given the alternative of getting a recorded version

8. Please rate the quality of instruction:

International School Leaders

Excellent (n=2)
Very Good (n=1)

African Principals

Excellent (n=3)
Very Good (n=1)

9. Each online module costs \$335 USD. How affordable is this amount in your context?

International School Leaders

Affordable (n=1)
Somewhat affordable (n=1)

African Principals

Affordable (n=2)
Somewhat affordable (n=2)

10. In thinking about the technology required to complete the module, please select issues that confronted you.

International School Leaders

no issues listed

African Principals

unstable internet (n=2)
quality of computer
internet speed too slow
browser problems

11. Do you have any general comments you would like to share?

International School Leaders

- It's just fantastic in every way. Thank you so much for this!
- Nothing to add here. My tech set up worked nicely and I enjoyed the content of the module.

African Principals

- I enjoyed the course and would be willing to take on another module in case I pass this one
- It's just fantastic in every way
- Nothing to add here. My tech set up worked nicely and I enjoyed the content of the module
- The only issue I personally had was to upload my intro video. After various tries I managed.

Comparison of African Principal Reflections to School Leaders from International Schools

As noted above, African principals identified three key ideas as pivotal to their learning: student-centred leadership, leadership frameworks, and the notion of positive contagion.

In comparison, several of the international school participants identified leadership standards and the leadership frameworks as key ideas, for similar reasons and with a similar impact. And, within these standards, it was the focus on student outcomes that was referenced by all international school leaders.

The principal as a 'change agent' also resonated with the African and international school participants. The concept clearly provided an alternative perspective to the role and one that they quickly identified with upon reflection:

I plan to continue to live by the motto "be the change you want to see". I stood by this as a teacher and I hope I can live up to it as a leader. I realize as a leader that many stakeholders look to me to set the tone of the organization and the team. This especially applies to the expectations that I set and the clarity of my message when I am communicating. (International School Leader)

In my current context, leading change is going to play an important role in trying to achieve the cherished goal of putting the student at the centre of all practices in the school. I would therefore consider lots of teacher professional development (TPD) projects in order to garner commitment to the changes that we may put in place. (African Principal)

In contrast, all three international school leaders referenced the concept of a collaborative culture as a key component of their learning:

This concept of collaborative influence is key to improving both student achievement and well being because collective knowledge and collaborative learning help create a collaborative culture where teachers and parents will feel more valued and, therefore, lead to an increase in student achievement. (International school leader)

It was the direct connection to student achievement, however, that provided the greatest insights into the learning. These leaders made the connection between a collaborative culture and other dimensions of leadership such as building trust:

This concept of building trust while working collectively plays a vital role in increasing student achievement and well being because if this is achieved then teachers, students, parents will feel in a safe environment where open communication along with collective work becomes a daily routine and part of the school culture. I plan to continue to build a meaningful relationship with both students and parents throughout the year. Once trust is in place, students and parents give more of their time and effort towards student achievement and wellbeing. (International school leader)

And finally, in terms of length and quality of the reflections, submissions from the African principals and the international school leaders were very similar.

Discussion

How Different Were the Experiences of African Principals and International School Leaders?

Beyond the technical and time challenges, the experiences were very similar. This is a somewhat surprising finding given the extreme differences in context; however, as Scott and Byrne (in press) posit: "Participants in fact make sense of specific resources in their context during discussions, reflections and application" (in press). It is this making sense of the resources in their respective context that likely explains why the African principals showed a high level of consistency in identifying key concepts, while the international school leaders showed greater diversity.

What Did Not Work for African Principals?

Challenge #1: The main challenges facing the participation of African principals are related to the technical infrastructure (internet speed and reliability). First, participants report electricity outages as a common and recurring issue. Second, even with electricity, the Internet is unstable and often slow. And, finally, the actual hardware and software (browser) were a source of difficulties.

All of these technical infrastructure issues created frustration, delays in response, and, in four cases, the inability to proceed with the module despite considerable support.

Challenge #2: Finding the time for professional learning, given the heavy demands of the role, was a central issue. Although this is not necessarily unique to the African principals, it is without doubt a more significant issue as evidenced by late assignments and responses to the instructor about time management.

Challenge #3: The lack of participation in the video conferencing session is undoubtedly the result of technical and time related issues. However, it emerged as something that all felt was an important component and likely needed to be compulsory. This, of course, relates to their interest in making deeper connections, viewing the body language, and engaging at the emotional level – referenced by many.

Challenge #4: The price of the module is likely an issue. Although the price was judged as somewhat affordable, we know that using school funds to support personal, professional learning is very problematic for African principals. Unlike their counterparts in international schools, specific funds for professional learning are not set aside.

What Worked for African Principals?

The Content: In light of the different context and the literature, one might have expected that the content might not be applicable. The evidence, however, suggests the opposite: the content was judged to be applicable and with some level of contextualizing, the ideas were implementable.

The #1 What: Student-Centred Leadership: With references in their responses to the leadership-management dichotomy and management related issues, it is understandable how attractive and impactful this concept remains. The concept elevates their role from manager to leader and provides a solid, research base for every decision. In effect, it shifts principal efficacy, thereby fostering collective efficacy.

The #2 What: Leadership Frameworks: As discussed by Scott and Byrne (in press), the leadership frameworks offer an important perspective on the role. The frameworks take what appear to be abstract and disconnected ideas and merge them into a whole that is easily understood. As noted in the reflections, some contextualizing is required, but ultimately they can be used to self assess and guide practice.

The #3 What: Positive Contagion: It is fascinating that all African principals identified this concept is key. Perhaps it relates to their context and the enormity of the challenges. Perhaps it relates to a sense that the great stories are not being told. Or, perhaps it reflects the overall nature of these school leaders – positive, uplifting, and inspirational. Regardless, this concept captured their imagination for action.

The Course Design: 'Online' is a word used to define a wide range of learning opportunities, from self-directed and asynchronous, to fully synchronous. With the pilot, participants experienced an instructor-directed, asynchronous design, with a 'live' opportunity. Evidence suggests that without the regular support of the instructor and engagement of peers, many principals would not have completed the module. Motivating the learner and building the collaborative learning environment are key ingredients for success.

The Academic Rigor: The length of the readings and the writing requirements, all in English, proved not to be a challenge. Indeed, the African principals judged these requirements to be less difficult than their international school counterparts.

The Navigation of the Module: Principals found the module easy to navigate. This finding re-affirms the module design principles discussed earlier: weekly units, unit listings for navigation, sequential presentation of units/topics, and tracking of assignment completions. It also re-affirms evidence of the high quality of the Learning Management System.

Connecting with Others Outside Their Jurisdiction: Principals identified making connections outside of Africa as an important advantage of the online delivery. This view was substantiated in the personal reflections with reference to specific people and ideas that made a difference.

The Instructor: It took patience, determination, and commitment on the part of the instructor to coach, cajole, and guide at an individual level. Without this personal, unrelenting force, the success rate would be considerable lower. All of this re-affirms the findings of Scott and Byrne (In press):

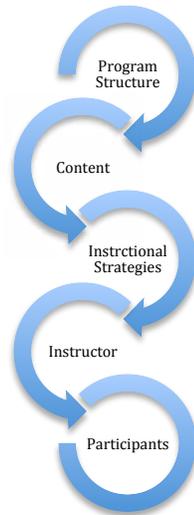
First, instructors need to have evidence of excellence in the role of school leader and be able to provide actionable feedback.... need to have extensive experience in teaching adults and understand their learning needs.... need to demonstrate a passion and commitment to the learning of others with evidence of long-term mentoring relationships that extend beyond the confines of the program expectations. (p.36)

What are the Lessons?

Lesson 1: Understand the Components of a Program

Utilizing the conceptual framework developed by Scott and Byrne (in press) is an effective approach to better understanding the nature of online learning experiences. As noted in Figure 3, all components need to be examined in the selection of online learning opportunities.

Figure 3: Online Learning Conceptual Framework



Lesson 2: Self-Directed Online Opportunities Will Likely Fail

Building a supportive online learning environment is absolutely necessary for African principals to be successful.

Lesson 3: Be Careful About Your Assumptions

In addressing the professional learning needs of African principals, it is absolutely critical to question all assumptions based on 'western' perspectives and research.

Lesson 4: Understand Contextualization of Content at the Individual Level

Participants need to be presented with the best, most-recent learning resources and strategies that promote sense making in their context.

Lesson 5: Know That Program Structure Matters

Online courses must be structured to reflect the demanding role of the principal. In particular, module must be divided into weekly units, each requiring a maximum of three hours.

The start-up phase of a course must include an extended period of time for signing in and completing a minor activity. This phase should be a minimum of seven days, allowing for all of the technical issues to be addressed.

The 'introduce yourself' activity that requires the use of the video recording feature of the LMS needs to be identified as a second option, with clear instructions about abandoning the attempts before becoming frustrated.

The course units need to provide for a 'catch up' period in which no new activities are required and those behind can catch up. It may be that at some point, two cohorts are established within the one course in an effort to keep participants actively engaged. Participants need to be offered several opportunities for a web conference. Given the range of technical issues, one offering is insufficient.

Beyond structural adaptations, the course time demands of the program need to be flexible for the cohort. These in-the-moment adjustments should lead to further structural changes as our understanding of the needs expands.

Lesson 6: Know That The Program Instructor Matters More

The instructor needs to be committed at an extraordinarily level to the learning of the African principals. It needs to be a commitment based on passion, compassion, and deeply rooted principles. It needs to be a moral imperative for the individual.

Lesson 7: Build A Global Cohort

It would be a mistake to establish 'African only' cohorts. Engaging other school leaders from around the world is a critical advantage of the online environment and one that should be fostered.

Lesson 8: Know That Price May Matter the Most

Participation will be very price sensitive - 'Western' fees will be too high.

Lesson 9: Take Advantage of Face-to-face Functions

Although online learning offers many advantages, creating hybrid delivery opportunities may provide a wider range of advantages. Regional or international conferences may offer opportunities to commence learning that will ultimately be concluded online.

Lesson 10: Learning Management System

Canvas proved to be exceptional as a LMS.

Conclusion

Realizing the dream of online learning for school leaders will require further study into the design and delivery, under a variety of contexts. Our study probes the common experience of international school leaders and principals from Africa in taking a well-established online course. In the end, we draw key design and delivery principles that should guide the provision of online professional learning for school leaders.

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